

# CARRIE HATCHETT, SPACE ADVENTURER

COLLECTION, VOLUME 1

MISSION: IMPROBABLE  
PASSAGE TO PARADISE  
TRANSGALACTIC ANTICS

J.J. GREEN

**CARRIE HATCHETT,**

**SPACE ADVENTURER**

**Books 1 – 3**

**by**

**J.J. GREEN**

**This collection uses British spellings.**

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# **The Books of Carrie Hatchett, Space Adventurer Complete Series • Book 1: Mission Improbable**

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# Prologue

ON CATERPILLAR TRACKS, the mechanical alien trundled to the ocean's edge, where a sluggish liquid flopped onto the sand, withdrew and flopped again, under a deep violet sky. The alien inserted a tube beneath the ripples. Suction commenced, accompanied by a low vibration. As the extracted liquid gurgled and slurped, the mechanical alien transmitted a message to central command: Operation progressing satisfactorily.

Unnoticed, in the glimmering darkness beyond the shoreline, a wave appeared. Unnoticed, the wave approached slowly, silently, stealthily. Unnoticed, it loomed like a predatory beast. With a dreadful, dull splash, the wave fell. When it withdrew, the sand was bare.

Central command's communications went unanswered. It never heard from the mechanical alien again.

# Chapter One – Through The Glowing Green Mist

CARRIE HATCHETT'S INTERVIEWER, Ms. Bass, had no eyebrows. Or, rather, she had pretend eyebrows. About halfway between the naked ridges where her natural eyebrows once grew and her hairline were two thinly drawn, semi-circular lines. A cloud of bouffant grey hair circled her head.

Carrie watched the pretend eyebrows to see if they moved along with the rest of Ms. Bass' face, but they did not. No expression seemed to register on them. They were independent, only supervising the action going on below. Carrie was sure of it because she watched for several minutes while Ms. Bass' voice droned in her ears.

But then a sharp frown drew the eyebrows down until they were almost within a natural distance of her eyes.

"Ms. Hatchett? Ms. Hatchett? Did you hear what I just said? Are you listening?"

Carrie, startled, forced her gaze down to Ms. Bass' face, and flinched at her stony look. "What? I'm sorry? What did you say?"

"I said, your CV doesn't mention any call centre experience."

"That's right, I've never worked in a call centre." Carrie fidgeted. The rent on her new flat was expensive. She needed this job. And she wanted it. For once in her life, she was going to be a success. She was determined.

Ms. Bass lowered Carrie's CV to the table. "You are aware the position you're interviewing for is *supervisor* of a call centre?"

"Yes."

"But you've never worked in a call centre before?"

"No."

"Ms. Hatchett, do you even know what goes on in call centres?"

"People..." Carrie recalled the office cubicles she had passed when she came in, which had been full of people wearing headsets, speaking into microphones, and watching computer screens. "...take calls?" She twisted a ring around her middle finger. She should have done some research before coming to the interview, but she had been busy unpacking and getting Toodles and Rogue settled into their new home.

Ms. Bass sighed and leafed through Carrie's CV. She frowned. "What's Bagua Zhang?"

"It's a martial art. I'm a—"

Waving a hand to silence her, the woman cleared her throat. "So, you've worked in a florist's, been a professional dog walker, spent a summer selling ice-cream and worked as a..." She removed her glasses

and squinted, moving the paper away from her face. "A birthday telegram girl?"

"Yes, but the clean kind. You know, teddy bears, rabbits, Disney princesses, that kind of thing. Not the..." Carrie swallowed. "...the other kind." She pulled her skirt closer to her knees.

Ms. Bass locked eyes with Carrie for a silent moment, then placed the CV on her desk. She picked up a checklist and began ticking boxes.

"You don't suffer any chronic illnesses, do you?"

"No."

"Mental illness? Depression?"

"No."

"Good. That's very good." Ms. Bass nodded. "We have enough of that around here as it is."

She ticked a few more boxes. Carrie leaned forward to read the list, but Ms. Bass curled the paper up and away from her, smiling tightly. "Excuse me a moment." She got up from her desk, taking the checklist with her, and went to her office door. She peered down the corridor towards the chairs where Carrie had sat, alone, while waiting to be called in. She left, leaving the door ajar, and a moment later her shrill voice echoed up the corridor. "No one else applied at all? Not even a phone call?"

Carrie couldn't make out the reply but she soon heard footsteps thumping closer. Ms. Bass entered, sat and put on her glasses. Gathering up the papers on her desk, she fixed Carrie with a glare.

"When can you start?"

Carrie's mouth fell open. "You mean I've—?"

"Yes, yes. What's the earliest you can start? Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Yes, I think I can start tomorrow."

"Good. Nine o'clock. I'll put you on the day shift, but we're open twenty-four hours and at other times you might have to do the evening or graveyard shift. Okay?" It was more of a challenge than a question.

Carrie opened her mouth.

"We can sort out the details tomorrow. See you then, Ms...Ms..."

Ms. Bass stood and held out her hand.

"Hatchett." Carrie shook the offered hand.

"Ms. Hatchett. Welcome to the team."

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AS SHE FINISHED UNPACKING that evening, Carrie could see Toodles and Rogue were as excited about her new job as she was. Toodles was, admittedly, hiding under the bed and throwing out her claws to

scratch Carrie whenever she walked too close, and Rogue was sitting in the corner of the living room staring gloomily at the wall, his normally waggy tail motionless, but Carrie could tell that, deep down, they shared her happiness.

She removed newspaper wrappings from some glasses and put them away in a kitchen cupboard before starting on her mugs, bowls and plates. The kitchen in her new flat was a little poky and the door of the cupboard under the sink was stuck, but the flat would have to do for now. Maybe after a while working as a...what was it?...call centre supervisor, she would get a raise or a promotion and she would be able to afford a better place.

She tried the cupboard under the sink again, but the door would not budge. She would have to speak to her landlady about it.

*A fresh start in a new area and, within a week, a new job.* It was more than she could have hoped for. Just a couple of weeks ago, when Barry had dumped her, she'd never imagined she would get back on her feet again so quickly. *Huh, Barry! What a loser.* She was better off without him. She would email him tonight and tell him her good news; then he would see what a mistake he had made.

It'd been a such a shock when he said he wanted to split up. Everything had been fine between them, then suddenly, goodbye Carrie. She never listened to him, he'd said. Never took any notice of anything he told her. It was like living with a brick wall. Carrie shook her head. *What a load of rubbish.* She might lose track of the conversation sometimes, but everyone did that.

Carrie put her saucepans, frying pans and baking trays in a cupboard and flattened the empty cardboard box. She nodded to herself. Yes, Barry was an idiot. She would soon find someone new. There was that employee at the call centre who'd given her a wink when she walked past. He was gorgeous, and friendly. Maybe he was single. She would have to find out more about him tomorrow.

All the cardboard boxes in the kitchen were empty so Carrie went to check the rest of the flat. She saw a small unopened box in the bedroom. Toodles' claws flashed out as she passed the bed, but she sidestepped just in time.

"Toodles, sweetiepie, did you miss Mummy?"

Carrie opened the box. Inside were a bottle of washing up liquid, scourers, a plunger, washing up brushes, spray cleaner and cloths. Everything that should go under the kitchen sink. She would have to force that door open.

On the way back past the bed Toodles caught her, raking three long scratches through her tights.

"Ow! Toodles, that really hurt. Don't be cheeky." Carrie squatted and peered under the bed. Baleful orange eyes glowed in the shadows.

“You’re a very naughty girl sometimes, did you know that?” As Carrie reached towards the cat, her claws made another lightning-fast appearance, and Carrie snatched her hand away. A hiss was followed by a guttural, whining growl.

Squinting into the darkness Carrie said, “Okay, so you want to be alone for a little while. I can see that. It’s a new place and you’re feeling vulnerable. I get it.” She stood and picked up the box. “Barry doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I do listen. I do hear what people have to say.”

After returning to the kitchen, Carrie pulled with all her might at the stubborn cupboard door, but it would not budge. She opened the other cupboards, but they were all full. She frowned at the box of kitchen stuff. It was so annoying. It was the last box, and if she could just put the contents away she would be finished.

Rogue clattered into the kitchen, barking, his paws slipping on the tiles. Carrie smiled. Her lovely handsome dog was feeling better already. Then she noticed what he was barking at. The cupboard door under the sink was glowing, a green pulsating light. Her hand went to her mouth. “Oh no. Rogue, what is it?”

Toodles’ catty whine from the bedroom joined Rogue’s deep-throated woofs, creating an escalating cacophony until, with a bang, the door flew open. Carrie jumped. Rogue whimpered and fled, his tail between his legs. Toodles’ whine stopped. A vivid green glow shone from the cupboard, bathing the kitchen in an eerie light.

Her heart in her mouth, Carrie stumbled back towards the kitchen door, intending to follow Rogue’s hasty retreat, but after a moment she hesitated. Her breathing slowed, and her head tilted to one side. She took a step towards the cupboard, and another. Bending down, she peeped inside.

Green mist swirling in a lazy spiral filled the space. She crouched closer, gazing at the mist. It looked like an emerald Milky Way set in motion, its centre disappearing into infinity. Carrie couldn’t figure out what it was. A gas leak? Something supernatural? She stuck out her nose and sniffed. The mist had no smell. A sudden thought occurred—maybe she could ask for a rent reduction? Swirling green substances in cupboards were definitely an inconvenience, especially when they frightened her pets.

As her hair began to lift and pull towards the open cupboard, Carrie wondered briefly what it might mean, before she was sucked, head first, under her kitchen sink.

## Chapter Two – Nature Calls

CARRIE SLID FACE DOWNWARD across a smooth floor until the top of her head encountered a wall, bringing her to an abrupt halt. “Owww!” She pulled herself into a sitting position and rubbed her nose and head while she blinked and looked about.

She could remember Rogue barking, Toodles yowling and a glowing green mist that sucked her into a cupboard and... She looked around again. The creamy white ceramic floor she had slid along rose seamlessly into walls and a ceiling, as though she were inside a roofed coffee cup. Behind her, the place she had entered through was now smooth and whole. She searched the area, running her fingertips over the surface. There was no sign of an entrance, and the green mist had completely disappeared. Stepping back, she peered left and right. The corridor was curved like a tunnel and led away on either side of her, lit by a soft glow which seemed to have no source.

Carrie smiled and nodded confidently. “I get it. This is a dream. I must have fallen asleep. Shouldn’t have had that half bottle of wine after dinner.” She shrugged. “Oh well, might as well follow it through.” She pointed at the either end of the tunnel alternately, mouthing an old nursery rhyme, before settling on one and striding away.

Curved recesses that Carrie assumed were doors of some kind lined the tunnel walls, apparently randomly along the sides, floor, and ceiling. Bordering each recessed section were long lines of symbols, some black, some raised, and some flashing intermittently. Pressing on the recessed areas and the symbols caused no reaction, Carrie discovered. She frowned, wondering when she would wake up.

Walking farther, she found that new corridors opened in the tunnel walls, and she followed them randomly. They all seemed identical but for the symbols along the edges of the recesses. She examined them closely and found that no two sets of symbols were the same. The only factors linking them were their positioning in the corridors and their utter lack of any apparent meaning. There was nothing she remotely recognised. She began to take a dim view of her subconscious for coming up with this stuff.

As she wandered along, a nagging ache in her lower regions alerted her to another reason she needed to wake up. The after-dinner wine she had drunk had made its way through her body and was now asking to be released. Carrie stopped and closed her eyes before quickly opening them wide. “Damn. Why can’t I wake up?” She began marching in small steps. “Come on, dream, be over.” She increased her pace, hoping her dreaming mind would supply an exit.

She stopped. There it was, unmistakeable, the symbol to answer her prayers. Towards the top of a recess was a black circle above a triangle with a rectangle below. She had found the women's toilets. Her sleeping mind must have put the symbol there as a way to leave her dream.

Reaching up, Carrie thumped the symbol and stood back expectantly. The recess didn't open nor move even slightly. "Oh, come on." She scanned the rest of the meaningless signs and pressed them up and down the line randomly, then in sequence, then in patterns. She tried hitting them hard and pressing them gently. "Open up! I want to wake up now. I need to spend a penny." The motionless face of the recess seemed to mock her. "Now you're being really annoying."

She drummed on the symbols, the walls, the recess, and the floor until, an uncomfortably long time later, she gave up. Up and down the corridor all was still and silent. This dream was crazy. She vowed never to drink after dinner again. And maybe even before dinner. Or while eating.

Wondering what to do next, she rested her hand against the recess. As her palm made contact the barrier disappeared, sending her tumbling through an open entrance.

Her knees struck the floor and she threw her hands out while screwing her eyes shut against a glaring white light, much brighter than the soft glow of the corridor. She opened her eyes a slit, then immediately closed them again. Her dream had turned into a nightmare. Her brief glimpse had told her she was in a cream ceramic room, and at its centre squatted a large, bronze, hard-shelled, many jointed, bug-eyed *thing*. Carrie swallowed and, with a sense of inevitability, looked over her shoulder towards the opening she had fallen through. It was no longer there.

"Wake up now, please," she squeaked. Squinting ahead once more, a faint hope formed in her. Maybe the creature wasn't alive? Maybe it was a statue?

Ten pairs of legs started simultaneously into motion. The thing scuttled towards her, and Carrie scuttled backwards on hands and feet, never taking her eyes from the monster, until she reached the corner of the room. "Dream be over, dream be over." She pasted herself into the unyielding wall. The huge bug approached, dripping mucus from its jaws as they opened, the claws at the ends of its legs tapping against the ceramic floor. When its head was a short distance from Carrie's face, the creature stopped. She was entertaining a fleeting thought that there was a tiny, remote chance she wouldn't be eaten, when another set of jaws, smaller, sharper and infinitely more vicious, appeared from the gaping maw.



Carrie closed her eyes and waited for the end, wondering if it was possible to feel pain in dreams.

“Thank you for coming. Would you please take a seat?”

## Chapter Three – The Bug

CARRIE'S EYES SNAPPED open. Knife-edged mini-jaws were inches from her face. Her terrified expression was reflected in each of the creature's hundred eyes. Drips of mucus spattered on the floor, and steamed.

"I—I'm sorry?" asked Carrie.

"Would you like to sit down?"

She peered to either side of the bug. There didn't seem to be anyone or anything else there. There was only one conclusion possible: It had to be the ravening monster of her dream speaking.

Carrie took a shaky breath. "But...I am sitting down."

"Are you?" The bug blinked, a tiny transparent membrane flashing over the surface of each of its eyes. "I always get humans confused with squashpumps. I suppose my proximity is making you uncomfortable, too?"

"Y—Yes, it is, actually. And if you wanted me to take a seat, I'd need a chair."

The creature scuttled backwards to the centre of the room. Carrie's rigid muscles eased and she exhaled through pursed lips.

"I apologise," said the bug. "I am new to this. I would appreciate it if you do not mention anything to my superiors."

"Umm...no, I won't. Don't worry." She checked around quickly for signs of more massive insects.

"Thank you." The bug squatted on its ten pairs of legs, their joints rising higher than its body. Its head twisted until it was perpendicular to the floor. "I understand you are here to interview for the position of Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer."

"No." Carrie wedged her back into the corner, which seemed the safest place in the circumstances.

"No?" the creature emitted an intricate, musical clicking. "That is incorrect. See, your application is here."

"Where?"

"Whoops, there I go again. I forgot humans cannot see in that wavelength. I will read it out to you."

*"W4M Carrie, 23 YO." It paused, clicked, and continued,*

*"New in town, AL, PIS, GSOH, SD, NM, NS, WLTM S VGL man with SI (martial arts and pub quizzes) for FTA poss. LTR."*

Carrie's flush reached the roots of her hair. "That's my—my ad on a dating website. How did you get hold of it?"

"You are mistaken. This is not an advertisement. This is an

application in transgalactic code. Translated into English it says, *I would like to apply for the position of—*”

“No it doesn’t.” Carrie leapt to her feet, her fists clenched at her sides. “It doesn’t say anything like that. It’s a lonely hearts ad, and you’ve no business—”

“But how did you correctly find and identify this interview room?”

“I didn’t know it was an interview room. I wasn’t even looking for an interview room. I needed to...I thought it was the—”

“And you bear the wounds of previous encounters in this line of duty.”

“No, I don’t, I...what?” Carrie glanced down at her body, and back at the creature. A hundred bug eyes were swivelled in the direction of her lower leg. She turned her foot to see what the bug was looking at. Toodles’ scratch marks ran down her calf to her ankle. “That was my cat!”

“Cat. A cat is another Earth animal. Am I correct? So you were not engaged in resolving a conflict between species, you were fighting with this animal—”

“No, I wasn’t fighting with her. She’s my pet.”

“Pet. A pet is an animal that lives with a human. So you were fighting with your pet...Why are you living with an animal that attacks you?”

“I told you, I wasn’t fighting with her. You’ve got it completely wrong. Oh...” Carrie grabbed her head in both hands and slumped down to the floor.

The creature made its clicking noise. “I believe you are expressing signs of agitation. Have I done something incorrect or inappropriate? Please do not tell my superiors. This is the third duty I have been assigned to. If I fail in the proper execution of my tasks in this position I will be terminated.” The thing retracted its internal jaws as its head returned to a horizontal position, and drooped.

“But...” Carrie sighed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right. Let’s get it over with.” This dream was becoming weirder and weirder. She wondered if the wine she had drunk had been off. “Let’s do the interview, then.”

The razor jaws popped out again, and Carrie sat upright, but the creature began talking about boring, political stuff and places and warring factions she had never heard of. She relaxed and lay on her side. Resting her elbow on the floor and her head in her hand, she soon zoned out. Occasionally, the bug would ask a question and she would answer yes or no, as the mood took her.

“Are you familiar with the cultural customs of the Inner Sect of Mantrikees?”

“Yes.” Carrie yawned.

“Would you mind undertaking missions that may expose you to threats to your personal safety?”

“No.”

As the interview continued the ache in her bladder grew and she tried again to figure out a way to wake up. Her arm began to twinge, and she adjusted her position. She could now see behind the giant bug’s shining bronze carapace. There was something there. It was a handbag, sitting in the middle of the floor. A gorgeous designer handbag. She sat up. “Excuse me, what’s that?”

The creature’s monotonous drone ceased, and its ten pairs of legs scuttled as it turned round to the bag. It hooked a leg through the strap, lifting the bag, and turning back, tossed it so that it landed with a thunk and a jingle at Carrie’s feet. Inside the open bag were strange devices, some of which blinked with tiny electronic lights.

“This is a Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer’s toolbox.”

“*Toolbox?*”

“Disguised as a portable Earth receptacle so that it may be carried around at all times in case you are assigned to assist in a transgalactic intercultural community crisis when you are not at home.”

Grabbing the handbag in both hands, Carrie lifted it to eye level and gazed at it. The material was thick and expensive and the design was finely stitched. “It’s beautiful. What is it, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Ralph Lauren?” If only she were not dreaming.

The creature clicked, seemingly unsure what to answer.

“So,” said Carrie, “if I do this transgalactic liaison thingy, I get to keep the bag?” There was no harm in asking. She began to hope, crazily, this was not a dream after all.

“The bag’s contents are indispensable to the performance of your duties in the role—”

“I’ll do it.”

“But the interview is not yet concluded.”

“I know, but I really need to...” She crossed her legs and riffled through the strange implements inside the bag. “Anyway, you know, I’d be really good at...whatever it was you were talking about. And...wait a minute, shouldn’t there be a screwdriver thingy?”

“I am unfamiliar with the English vocabulary item, screwdriverthingy.”

“It opens and locks things. Turns stuff on and off. Does whatever you need it for, really.”

“There is an articulated transmitting infrared—”

“Never mind. If I can have the bag, I’ll do it.” The creature’s inner jaws were paused open. “Or,” continued Carrie, wagging a finger, “I might have to have a word with your superiors.”

The bug's jaws clicked shut. "You also need a uniform."

"Uniform? Oh, you mean like a costume? Cool." Carrie imagined herself in something black, with a mask and a cape; a long, flowing cape that billowed out behind her as she flew— "What are *they*?"

A section of wall had opened behind the bug, revealing a long rack of fluorescent orange jumpsuits ranging from toddler size to what looked like collapsed parachutes. "These are Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniforms."

"But they're, they're...Why are they that horrible colour?"

"Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers—"

"Don't you have a shorter way of saying that?"

"No. Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers must stand out in conflict zones to avoid..."

But Carrie wasn't listening. She strode over to the jumpsuits and hastily pulled two or three out to hold up against herself. Her bladder nagged. She found a uniform that was about her size. It was a bit small but she was on a diet so she should be thin enough to fit into it within a couple of weeks. She shook her head. What was she thinking? This was a dream, for goodness sake. "Now, where's the way out?"

"But..." said the bug.

"Or," said Carrie, drawing her brows into what she hoped was a stern frown, "should I speak to someone about how you began the interview by frightening the life out of me?"

Behind the huge insect, a circle of swirling green mist appeared. Carrie pushed the orange jumpsuit in with the weird devices, put the bag on her shoulder and went towards the mist. The bag felt solid and heavy, as though it were real. "Thank you very much." The coiling mist began to lift her hair. "What do I have to do in this job?"

"As a neutral, independent, disinterested member of an alien race, it will be your duty to mediate between disaffected populations to solve political and territorial disputes—"

"Like a space detective? Great."

"No, not remotely like a space—"

"Okay, bye, thanks," Carrie called as the mist took her.

## Chapter Four – Dave

CARRIE RUBBED HER EYES and yawned as she entered her kitchen the following morning. Though she had taken Rogue for his morning walk, the fresh air hadn't fully woken her. Toodles wound herself around Carrie's legs, meowing. Rogue thumped his tail on the floor and drooled.

"All right, all right, wait a minute." She went to the cupboard that held Toodles' and Rogue's food, but stopped midway across the room. Something was out of place. She pivoted on one foot to look more closely at her kitchen table. After pushing her knuckles into her eyes again, she blinked hard. On the table sat a gorgeous designer handbag, half open. A bright orange jumpsuit trailed from it and there were strange, electronic devices visible inside.

Carrie staggered a few steps and gripped the counter top. Her dream. It was the bag from her dream. But if it was really here, then...? Her eyes turned to her under-sink cupboard. She squatted and tugged the handle. The door was still stuck fast. No green glow, no mist, but the handbag was here, and there was no other explanation for it nor for the weird objects it contained.

Standing and looking through her kitchen window, she saw that outside the world seemed pretty much as she remembered it. The sky was grey and the day drizzly. Three floors below, cars and buses were passing and children were trudging to school. Two huge dogs were taking their owner for a walk. Could there really be inhabited planets and alien races and spaceships and all that stuff?

She shivered and rubbed her arms. If that giant bug and everything it talked about did exist *she* was not going to have anything to do with it. What was it the creature had said the job was? Space detective, that was it. She would probably have to go among aliens like that insect. No way. She was going to start work today as a...a call centre...thingy, and be normal. She was also bent on making a success of her new job. She was nearly twenty, and much too old to be drifting from one temporary position to another. This time, she was going to forge a career.

She gasped. She had forgotten she was starting work today. She looked at the clock. It was half past eight and she had to be there by nine. Grabbing tins of pet food, she hastily opened them and spooned the contents into Toodles' and Rogue's bowls. After rinsing the tins she threw them in her recycling box and turned to leave, but on the tabletop the gorgeous bag seemed to be tempting her. *Why not?* She thought. She doubted the alien bug could come after her for it. The space under her sink was far too small. It would never fit through, and

she had travelled through the mist to reach the bug. Aliens were probably forbidden by some galactic treaty from coming to Earth and scaring people.

Tipping the bag's strange contents onto the table, she quickly transferred the essentials from her old handbag into it. "Bye, Toodles, bye, Rogue," she called as she closed the door to her flat.

\*\*\*



"NICE BAG."

Carrie was passing through the cubicles on her way to her new desk when the good-looking guy spoke to her. He was sitting in the same place, headphone and mic on. Carrie grinned at him and hoisted the bag higher up her shoulder. He was right. It was a nice bag. A very nice bag. She smiled at the other workers, but they ignored her. Her smile fell. Oh well, it would take time to get to know everyone.

"So, this is where you sit." Ms. Bass motioned towards a clean, bare cubicle at the back of the room. It looked fresh and new, as if no one had stayed in it very long or made it into a personal space. Carrie sat down and was unable to resist swiveling her chair right around, catching hold of her desk to stop herself as she completed her circle.

Ms. Bass' eyebrows rose higher. She plonked down the large file she was carrying. "Your main responsibility is to deal with customer issues and complaints. All the procedures are in here." She tapped the file with a long, French-manicured fingernail. "You must become thoroughly acquainted with them. Luckily for you, Friday mornings are usually quiet, so you should have time to familiarise yourself a little with the necessary information before the first complaint comes in."

Carrie looked from the thick file to Ms. Bass. "That's all I have to do? Deal with complaints?"

"You must address the customers' issues according to the manual. To the letter. Do you understand?"

Carrie frowned. "Do you get a lot of complaints?"

Ms. Bass rolled her eyes, and left.

Swivelling her chair around again, Carrie noticed a young woman watching her as she spoke into a mic. Carrie smiled and waved, but the woman turned to her screen. Carrie sighed and pulled herself closer to her desk. She opened the file. The contents page was all but incomprehensible. She flicked through the thick wad of paper. *In the event of a faulty T-flange, one page read, complete form 167F. Include the date of purchase and the date the customer first noticed the fault. Tick the relevant boxes.* Listed below were a range of noises a faulty T-flange

might make, including whining, grinding, squeaking, and clunking. Carrie's shoulders sagged as she turned more pages. They were all similar: extremely long, detailed forms to complete and complex procedures to follow. What on Earth did this company sell?

Carrie gradually became aware of someone standing on the edge of her vision. The young woman who had caught her eye earlier was nearby, her jaws working on a piece of chewing gum.

Holding out her hand, Carrie said, "Hi, I'm—"

"Complaint, line five." The woman turned on her heel and walked away. Carrie's hand flopped to her side. A complaint? She had to get on it right away and make a good impression on her first day at work. She scanned her desk, but she had no telephone or headset and mic like everyone else. How was she supposed to...? She saw the woman had returned to her desk and was idly holding up a receiver while chatting with her colleague in the next cubicle. Hefting the complaints procedures file into her arms, Carrie went over.

"So I said to her," the woman said to her colleague in the next cubicle as Carrie took the receiver from her, "do all the teachers get fined when they go on strike, then, and I have to take time off work to look after Eddie because he can't go to school?"

Carrie held the receiver to her ear. Handel's Messiah was cut short as the woman pressed a button on her keyboard.

"Hello?" said Carrie. A stream of loud curses spewed from the receiver, and she jerked her head away. When the stream slowed to a trickle, she tried again. "Can I help—?" More curses followed, some of which were new to Carrie. She attempted to make eye contact with her work colleague in hope of some information or advice, but the woman was deep in conversation about the pros and cons of taking children out of school during term time. Cradling the receiver between her shoulder and neck, Carrie opened her file and scanned the pages while listening for a mention of something even vaguely familiar in the customer's rant, but she couldn't recognise anything. She tried once more to interrupt, but the man was so irate she couldn't break into the flow of words.

Carrie's heart sank. She wanted to do a good job, but how was she supposed to help if the customers wouldn't listen to her? And the instructions in the file were complete gobbledygook. It didn't take long for her to grow frustrated and bored. "Thank you, sir. We'll deal with that at the earliest opportunity," she said, and slammed the receiver down.

Her colleague paused in her conversation. "I don't think you're supposed to—" But Carrie was already returning to her desk.





BY TEN, CARRIE HAD dealt with four complaints in a similar way. Maybe she was not *exactly* following procedure, but when she had more time to learn the ropes she would improve, she was sure. *This job is a piece of cake*, she thought, and as she had that thought, she noticed that cake was being shared around the office. Everyone had put their customers on hold and they were all chatting and eating.

No one had brought her any cake. Carrie swivelled her chair round to face her desk and buried her head in her file, trying to pretend she hadn't noticed what was happening.

"It's Jerry's birthday today," said a male voice. "I thought you might like some cake." Carrie looked up. It was Mr. Handsome, plate and fork in hand, smiling at her.

"I'd love some," said Carrie, accepting the plate and immediately forking a piece of rich chocolate cake into her mouth. "Oh, this is delicious," she said, spitting crumbs.

"Yes, Mary made it. She does a lot of baking."

"It's wonderful." *That was so nice of him to bring me some cake*, she thought. *He must have seen I was left out*. The man propped himself on her desk, and her heart lifted.

"How are you getting on?" he asked.

"Oh, fine." Carrie paused. She chewed and swallowed. "Well, actually, I tell the customers we'll do something soon and hang up."

The man laughed. "That's one way of dealing with complaints, I suppose."

"I'm trying my best, but what else can I do? I've no idea where all those forms are that are mentioned in my file, and I don't know what most of this stuff means. In fact, I don't know what *any* of this stuff means."

The man waved dismissively. "Don't worry about it. No one from higher up ever said as much, but I think the idea is to frustrate the customers so much they give up complaining. The last person who took the job didn't last more than an hour. He's the reason you don't have your own phone." He nodded at a dent in the wall.

Carrie's eyes widened. "He threw it at the wall?"

"Maintenance haven't got around to supplying a new one. It might take a while."

"Doesn't matter. I can use all of yours. It isn't like I'm on the phone for long." She shovelled another large piece of cake into her mouth. It was delectable.

"I'm Dave, by the way."

"Carrie."

"Nice to meet you, Carrie." He stood to leave.

"Hey, Dave, I'm new in town. I don't suppose, tonight, maybe...?"

“Oh, you’re having a housewarming?”

Carrie closed her eyes as she ate the last mouthful of sweet, moist, crumbly cake. She nodded absently.

“Sure, I’ll come over. About seven?”

“Mmmm...” Carrie sighed in satisfaction and sucked chocolate cream from her teeth. As Dave left, she realised he had agreed to a date. Her first day at her new job was getting better and better.

A few minutes later the gum-chewing woman arrived to take her plate.

“Thanks,” said Carrie. “Wait a minute. Can I ask you something?”

The woman paused, holding the plate in midair.

“That guy, Dave, is he, you know, attached?”

“Don’t know. Don’t think so.”

“Oh good. He’s gorgeous, don’t you think? And he’s got great taste in clothes.”

The woman smirked. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but thought better of it, and walked away laughing.

## Chapter Five – Date With Disaster

THREE LARGE GLASSES of wine supplied Carrie with plenty of Dutch courage by seven o'clock that evening. She'd been very forward in inviting Dave to her place almost as soon as she met him, but why waste time? A guy like that wouldn't be single for long. You had to take your opportunities when they appeared or miss out.

It was also silly of her to invite an almost complete stranger into her home, but she didn't think the kind of men her mother warned her about offered you cake at work.

She was pouring herself a fourth glass of wine when the doorbell sounded. Swaying slightly, Carrie held the door open for Dave. He was carrying a bottle and had changed from his work clothes into a casual jacket, black T-shirt and close-fitting jeans.

"Hi, Dave." Carrie piped. She cleared her throat. "Hi, Dave, come in."

He handed Carrie the bottle and looked around as he entered the hallway. "Am I the first to arrive?" He took off his jacket and hung it on the hat stand.

Closing the door, Carrie thanked him as she took the bottle, then said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Am I the first arrival? To your party."

"Party?"

"You said you were having a housewarming."

"Did I?" Carrie thought back. Her mind was a little foggy, but she was quite sure she hadn't said that. Why would she invite other people to come between her and this handsome hunk? "Err..." She didn't know what to say.

"Oh, it looks like there's been a misunderstanding," said Dave. There was a pause. "Maybe I should—"

"Oh, don't go," exclaimed Carrie as Dave took his jacket. "You've only just got here. I'm sorry, I probably wasn't clear at work. First day nerves or something."

Dave grimaced. "Sorry, Carrie, but I think maybe you've got—"

"Can't you stay a little while? I'm new in this area and I don't know anyone." Carrie winced at the whiny tone in her voice.

Hesitating, Dave said, "What's that scratching?" The noise was coming from Carrie's living room door.

"Oh, that's Rogue. He wants to say hello."

"You've got a dog? Great! Can I meet him?"

Carrie opened the door, and Rogue bounded out, leapt up and began licking Dave's face as though he were a long lost friend.

"Get down, Rogue," said Carrie. "Dave's a guest. Be good." The dog

dropped onto his hind quarters and wagged his tail furiously.

Dave was looking closely at the dog's face. He swallowed hard.

"Wow, he's..."

"I know! He's so handsome, isn't he?"

"Well, I'm not sure...I'd go quite that far. I mean, he's very...what I mean is..." Dave was watching Carrie's expression. "You could say he's kind of unusual-looking."

"What do you mean?" Carrie's heart sank. Was Dave going to be like Barry and hate her pets? Unusual-looking? Rogue was the best-looking dog in the world. Okay, his eyes bulged out a bit and the left side of his face didn't match the right, but when she first got him from the rescue centre, she couldn't believe he'd waited for months to be picked. She'd snapped him up right away and felt a little guilty for not choosing a less attractive dog who might struggle to find a home.

Dave was patting Rogue and looking towards the door.

"So you like dogs, do you?" asked Carrie. "Why don't you stay and get to know Rogue a bit better?" She grinned hopefully.

"Hmmm, okay."

"Yes!" Carrie clapped her hands.

"But there's a Leonardo DiCaprio biopic on tonight. Do you mind if we watch it? I'm recording it, but I never seem to get a chance to watch anything these days, and I really wanted to see it."

"Leonardo DiCaprio?" Carrie shrugged. "Okay." She went to the kitchen for another glass while Dave went into the living room and turned on the television. The bright orange jumpsuit and pile of strange equipment was still on her kitchen table. Carrie had been ignoring it since she came home, uncertain of what she should do with it all. The Government would definitely be interested, but they would have also have a lot of difficult questions she couldn't answer without them locking her up. She wondered if she could put the stuff out for recycling. Most of it seemed kind of metallic.

"It's starting," called Dave.

He was sitting in a corner of the sofa. Carrie plonked herself down in the middle. Dave eased closer to the edge. She handed him a glass of wine, and leaned back, resting her head on the cushions. Photographs of Leonardo DiCaprio as a baby were scrolling across the TV screen.

"Born the eleventh of November, 1974," said Carrie, simultaneously with the narrator.

"Well done," said Dave. "You're a fan, too?"

"Oh no," said Carrie. "I read it somewhere. I remember stuff like that. I'm a mine of useless information, but it comes in handy for doing pub quizzes."

"I like pub quizzes too. What else do you like doing?"

“Bagua Zhang, an ancient Chinese martial art. It’s so cool. I’ve been doing it since I was thirteen. Do you want me show you some moves?”

“Er, no, that’s okay. I’m a bit of a film buff myself.”

Carrie nodded. “Makes sense.” Leonardo DiCaprio’s role in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* was being discussed in the documentary.

“He’s a great actor,” said Dave.

Carrie shrugged. “I suppose.”

Rogue was lying across her feet, and Toodles was in hiding somewhere, waiting for her to walk past unsuspectingly, no doubt. Such a sweet cat. Carrie was very, very relaxed, and the wine was making her head swim. She stole a look at Dave’s profile from the corner of her eye. He was so good-looking. *Almost as handsome as Rogue.*

Dave caught her looking at him, and she quickly looked away. He went back to watching the TV.

Carrie was sleepy. She yawned and stretched out her arms. Her right arm just happened to rest across the back of the sofa, behind Dave. He edged away. Carrie’s arm began a slow descent down the sofa back. As it touched Dave’s shoulders he scooted forward so that her arm fell onto the cushions.

He turned. “What are you doing?”

“What? I’m not doing anything.” Carrie’s cheeks flushed.

“You’ve had quite a lot to drink, haven’t you?”

“N-no...” She didn’t think so, anyway.

Dave took the remote control and turned down the volume on the TV. His expression became kind but serious. Carrie blinked. The evening didn’t seem to be going as planned.

“Carrie, it’s okay, I don’t mind. But I’m gay. I don’t make a secret of it, so I was a bit surprised at your behaviour. You only met me today, so of course you didn’t know.”

“You’re...oh.” Carrie’s head was suddenly painfully clear. “Sorry,” she said in a small voice.

“No, really, it’s okay. You don’t have anything to apologise for. It’s just a misunderstanding.” Dave turned up the TV volume and settled back. Carrie shifted to the middle of the sofa and wondered if she should move farther away, just to make clear how well she understood. The sound of the biopic commentary seemed to echo in the growing silence.

She couldn’t bear it any longer. “I suppose that happens to you a lot,” she blurted. “I mean, women...” She couldn’t think how to complete the sentence without drawing more attention to her terrible faux pas.

Without taking his eyes from the TV, Dave replied, “No, actually.”

Carrie wished the sofa cushions beneath her would slide apart so she could slip smoothly between them and down into the dark recess beneath, from which she would never, ever emerge.

Another silence stretched out. Carrie was acutely aware of Dave's presence next to her, heavy and still. Shots of Leonardo DiCaprio flashed across the TV screen, but she couldn't make sense of what the narrator was saying. He seemed to be speaking through cotton wool.

Dave stretched and let out a long, fake yawn. "You know, I'm really tired. I think I'll catch the rest of this at home."

"Don't you want to see the rest of the programme?"

"No, like I said, I'm recording it. I'll show myself out."

Carrie's face burned. "Okay, then."

"See you at work on Monday."

"Yes, see you." As Dave left the room Carrie buried her head in her hands. "You stupid, stupid woman," she mumbled. "You stupid—" Her head jerked up. The direction Dave left the living room had registered. He'd gone into the kitchen, probably to put his glass away. The kitchen, where a fluorescent orange jumpsuit and those weird, inexplicable objects were. She jumped up. "Dave," she called.

A green glow appeared in the open doorway, and Rogue began to bark. "Dave!" From a high shelf behind her came Toodles' yowl. Carrie ran into the kitchen. The under-sink cupboard door was open, and a glowing green mist was spilling from it. She was too late. Dave was nowhere to be seen. He must have been sucked through the mist and into that place with the terrible bug alien. She would have to go after him.

Hesitating, she looked from the open cupboard door to the table and back again. Should she take all that stuff the creature had given her? The bag to hold it all was in her bedroom, and the mist was beginning to fade. As the green glow dwindled, the cupboard door began to swing closed.

"Dave," shouted Carrie, as she dove through the remaining gap.

## Chapter Six – Bombardment

“OW,” CRIED CARRIE AS the top of her head struck a hard surface. “I’ve got to stop doing this.” Sitting up, the first thing she noticed was that she wasn’t in the ceramic building where she had encountered the insect alien. The second thing she noticed was the sound of whimpering.

The hard object her head had struck was a massive boulder, and the whimpering was coming from Dave, who was crouched next to it. He was curled in a fetal position, his arms over his head.

“C—C—Carrie, what’s happening? Where are we?”

Surrounding the boulder was an empty, dusty plain. To their left, in the distance, was what looked like a forest of single, massive, red leaves, stiffly arched. Behind them, a pale yellow sea lapped sluggishly at the shore. The boulder, which was the same off-grey colour as the plain, rose twenty feet high, and above it a light mauve sky softly glowed.

“Err...to be honest, I don’t actually know.”

“I remember looking at some tools that were on your kitchen table, when the cupboard door under your sink opened. There was this green light and I—I...”

“Got sucked in? Yes, weird, isn’t it? It happened to me yesterday.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“No, I went somewhere else before. It was a job interview.”

Dave straightened and sat up. He wrapped his arms round his knees and swivelled his head, blinking and squinting at the alien landscape. “A job interview?”

“Yeah.” Carrie looked around. They seemed to be alone, and their entry point had, predictably, disappeared.

“What job were you interviewing for?”

*How on Earth will we get back?* Carrie thought.

“Carrie.”

“What?”

“What job were you interviewing for?”

“Oh...” She waved her hand in a vague gesture. “Space detective, I think it was.”

Dave shook his head. “Space detective? This is insane. I must be dreaming.”

Carrie grimaced. “Yeah, I thought that, too. But, no, it’s real. Sorry.”

His head in his hands, Dave began to moan and rock. “This isn’t happening. It can’t be happening.” He lifted his head and stared at Carrie, his face white. “How do we get back? We have to go back.

Now. We have to.” His eyes widened and he pointed a shaking finger at her. “That’s where you got all the stuff on your kitchen table.”

She nodded.

“I thought it looked strange. So those were, like, made by aliens?”

Carrie shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“What do you do with them? I mean, what are they for?”

“To help me do the job.”

“But...”

“They’re back there, and we’re here. Yep, that had already occurred to me.” Carrie wondered if one of the tools was to open a passage back to her kitchen. She thought it wiser not to mention the possibility.

Dave began to moan and rock again.

“Okay, okay, calm down.” Carrie tried to look calm and confident. Inside, her chest was tight and her stomach churned. She stood. “Well, first we can—”

She was thrown to the ground as a massive boom filled the air and the boulder shuddered. She yelled and grabbed Dave as he grabbed her.

“What was th—” he said as another boom came. This time it was from the sea, and a towering plume of pale yellow, gloopy liquid rose into the air.

“I don’t kn—” The boulder shuddered again, and a crack appeared, running from the top to the base.

“Are those b—b—bombs?” Dave asked. “Carrie, are we in a war zone?”

Carrie wrung her hands, trying to remember what the insect had said. She was sure it had been talking about...something. She pressed her hands to her head. Two huge explosions created a spray of the liquid that rained down on them.

“Carrie!” The next explosion widened the crack in the boulder. “Quick, let’s go there.” Dave indicated the forest of huge, single leaves. “Whoever’s attacking, they don’t seem to be attacking that.”

The two of them sped over the plain towards the leaves. A memory flashed into Carrie’s mind. Something about the orange jumpsuit. Yes, that was it. The colour was so she would stand out in...her heart sank. In conflict zones. Conflict zones like the one they were in right now. And the jumpsuit was back on Earth.

The forest drew nearer. Behind them the deafening sounds of explosions continued, the ground vibrating at each one. Dave was ahead, but Carrie was gaining on him. When she drew abreast, he was red-faced and gasping.

“Come on,” she called. “Not much farther.” She silently thanked her Bagua Zhang instructor for pushing her to train outside of class



time. The first leaves of the forest were only a couple of hundred feet away. As she reached the first leaf, Carrie stopped and turned. A second later Dave caught up and sank, gasping, to his knees.

"Oh, it wasn't that far," Carrie said.

Dave feebly waved his hand by way of reply as he drew in large lungfuls of air. "Haven't..." pant "run like..." pant "that since I was..." pant "at school."

In a few minutes Dave's breathing eased, and they set off through the leaf trees. Each was nearly identical to the next. Wide, with a central rib and radiating veins, they looked like beech leaves, except several thousand times larger and a deep, unsettling red. All were facing the same way, irregularly spaced and casting a maroon shadow.

As they drew farther from the explosions, the ground vibrated less. Carrie squinted up at the cloudless sky where a small, intensely bright sun shone. A sun quite unlike the one Earth orbited. Though the temperature was balmy, Carrie shivered.

She glanced at Dave. His face had regained its colour after their run, but it was still rigid and his eyes were wide.

"Carrie," he said, after they had walked a little farther, "what are we doing? Where are we going?"

"We're getting away from those bombs or whatever they are."

"But we're far away now. We aren't in any immediate danger. I was wondering if you're taking us somewhere we can get back to Earth."

"Er, I'm not sure."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I haven't been here before."

"You said you'd been for a job interview. To become a space detective."

"Yes...but they didn't say anything about this place." At least, she didn't remember anything, though she hadn't been paying much attention at the time. Who pays attention in a dream? She decided against telling Dave about her giant bug interviewer with the razor-sharp, dripping fangs.

"So you have absolutely no idea where we are, or where we're going."

"Ermm..." Carrie disliked the implications of what she was about to say, but couldn't think of a way to avoid saying it. "No."

"Carrie." Dave grabbed her shoulders and spun her round. His hair, which had been perfectly, stylishly groomed only an hour or so previously was now a tussled mess. *Though quite attractively tussled*, Carrie thought. His skin shone with sweat. "Carrie. What are we going to do? How are we going to get back? We can't wander through this forest forever. We don't have anything to eat, or drink, or, or...what's

wrong?”

She hadn't noticed it at first, distracted as she was by Dave's dishevelled good looks, but even she couldn't fail to see the giant metallic object that was behind him. How it had got there she didn't know. Maybe it had been following them silently, or it had appeared out of nowhere. But there it undeniably was. A huge, grey length of metallic tubing that was folded—overlapping at the beginning and end—into a rectangle with curved corners. Through the hollow centre Carrie could see the giant leaves that led back the way they had come.

Reading Carrie's expression, Dave slowly turned around and looked behind him. He grabbed her arm and leaned in close to her ear.

“Does that look like what I think it looks like?” he whispered.

Carrie nodded. “A gigantic paperclip.”

## Chapter Seven – Out of This World

A SOUND LIKE TEN THOUSAND six year olds having their first violin lesson split the air. Carrie bent double and clasped her hands to her ears. She grimaced as the noise winkled its way between her fingers and penetrated her eardrums. She pressed her upper arms to her ears, but still the sound reverberated around her skull. Opening one eye a tiny slit, she found she was looking at Dave's neatly brushed suede boots. She squinted upward. He was standing, hands on hips, nodding thoughtfully at the massive mechanical alien. His lips moved, but Carrie couldn't make out his words above the off-key screeching.

She nudged him with her elbow, and he looked down at her. He raised his eyebrows. She read his lips. *What's wrong with you?*

"What's wrong with me?" she shouted. "What's wrong with you? Can't you hear that terrible noise?"

"What..." Dave's attention was drawn back to the alien. He shook his head and said something, spread his hands wide and shrugged.

"Dave," called Carrie. "What's going on? Are you..."

He was shaking his head vehemently. The discordant sound stopped, and in its place a low vibration hummed. The ground throbbed. Dave raised his arms as if to ward off a blow and began to rise into the air. His feet kicked uselessly. An invisible force gripped Carrie and began to lift her, too. As she left the ground, she spun round and tried to grip the pale, dusty sand, but her fingers snatched at air. She was carried inexorably upward.

Dave was rising with her, his arms and legs windmilling as he fought to free himself from the invisible force that gripped them. They floated towards the empty centre of the alien, where they hung suspended in midair. Open-mouthed, they stared at each other. The low vibration grew more intense, and the metal tubing surrounding them began to blur. The ground drew slowly away. The alien was lifting off and taking them with it.

Carrie closed her eyes as she bobbed gently between the two long lines of metal tubing. After a while, when nothing else seemed to be happening, she opened them again. Below her were the forest of red leaves, the grey plain, and the yellow ocean, all three receding at a steady pace. Above, the mauve sky deepened in colour. She gulped. "I hope this thing's safe," she said. "I wouldn't like to fall from this height."

Dave was swaying lazily next to her, his arms and legs akimbo, like a marionette whose puppet master had forgotten what he was supposed to be doing. He set his lips and glared.

"What?" said Carrie. "What have I done?"

“What have you done? What have you done? You invited me to your house for a housewarming party, only *I* was the only one invited. I decided to stay because you seemed lonely and I felt sorry for you, and as a reward for my kindness I was vacuumed underneath your sink and onto another planet.” He paused for breath. “Now I’m flying through the air inside an overgrown item of office stationery towards interrogation and probable execution on an alien spaceship. That’s what you’ve done, Carrie. That’s what you’ve done. If I hadn’t gone to your housewarming—” he raised two fingers of each hand to signal quote marks “—I’d be sitting at home right now with a cup of hot chocolate watching the closing credits of a very interesting biopic on Leonardo DiCaprio. The next time someone’s stupid enough to take the job of supervisor at my call centre, remind me to not to give them cake!”

Carrie’s mouth opened and shut and opened again. “What was that you said about interrogation and probable execution?”

“What? Didn’t you hear what the paperclip said?”

“No, all I could hear was a terrible noise pretending to be music.”

“What are you talking about? It was speaking English, clear as day.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it...” Dave grasped his hair before throwing his hands up. “Oh, never mind. It was asking us what we were and where we were from. When I answered, it got really angry. Then it said we were an unauthorised presence on a colonial planet, and if we couldn’t explain ourselves to its commander we would be subject to the highest penalty. And if this alien and its friends were responsible for the bombing, I think we can both imagine what that might be.”

As Carrie digested this latest piece of information, the sky turned a deeper mauve and the horizon became curved. The yellow ocean stretched over the planet surface as far as she could see. A small patch of red signalled the forest they had left what seemed only a short time ago. The forest sat at the edge of a large, grey, roughly crescent-shaped island.

Carrie thought back over the last twenty-four hours. It had been an eventful day for sure, what with her interview with the bug, her first day at the call centre, finding herself in a war zone, and now zooming up and away from an alien planet while being held within an invisible force field. Through all those events, though, in all that time, at no point had she thought this might be her last day alive.

She gasped. Toodles and Rogue. Who was going to feed them? Who was going to take care of them? Her lower lip trembled, and she began to cry.

Dave grimaced. “Look, it probably won’t come to that. Maybe I

misunderstood.”

Carrie was shaking her head, the force making her sway gently. “It isn’t that,” she said. “I’m sorry—” A fresh wail escaped her, and she couldn’t finish her sentence.

Dave sighed. “You don’t have to apologise. I didn’t mean what I said earlier. It isn’t your fault. All this...” He gestured at the deep mauve sky filled with stars and yellow planet below. “It could have happened to anyone.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant I’m sorry for Toodles and Rogue. Who’s going to look after them when I’m gone? They’ll be all aloooooone.” Her final word dissolved into fresh sobs.

Dave rolled his eyes. “Oh well, don’t mind about me, will you? I mean, I’m only another human being, practically a stranger, who you dragged into this mess.”

But Carrie didn’t hear him. She was howling, her head buried in her hands. Tears dribbled from between her fingers and hung suspended in midair. Dave batted them irritably.

A light from above distracted Carrie from her misery. Looking up, she closed her eyes to slits as the light grew more intensely bright. It was surrounded by pitch blackness. As they drew closer, the blackness was revealed to be a massive spaceship. Its outline was edged with stars, but they were faint in comparison to the brilliant light shining from the ship. The alien headed towards the light, which grew larger and larger until finally they flew right into it.

As they were carried into the spaceship, Carrie’s faint hope that it might be the place she had been interviewed was dashed. The interior was bright, shining silver, and the lighting was so intense that at first it dazzled her. The alien released them, and they hit the floor with a clunk. The surface was cold and smooth, and the ship was completely different from the place where Carrie’s interview had taken place. Her giant insect interviewer—who might have been able to get them out of their predicament—was unlikely to be found here.

They seemed to be in a large holding bay or warehouse of some kind. All around machinery moved, transporting and stacking matte black boxes. Carrie edged away from the open hatchway, where the yellow planet was visible far below. She rubbed her knees, which had taken the full force of her fall. The moment it had deposited them, the paperclip had zoomed away. Dave was standing, watching the metal machines. Carrie also watched them, and after a few moments of observing the wide range of shapes and sizes, realised they all looked familiar.

She stood, joining Dave, who was frowning.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

In answer, she pointed to a long, cylindrical object that narrowed

to a point at its top end and had a spring-loaded protuberance at the lower end, on which it bounced along. "It's like a pen," she said.

Dave pointed at another machine that consisted of two levers, hinged in the middle and bearing fangs at each end. "And that looks like a staple remover." The machine ran on caterpillar tracks.

Something else had a wide handle, a square base and two round poles that moved up and down caught Carrie's attention. She pointed at it and looked at Dave with a frown.

"Hole punch," he said.

The two stood without speaking for several moments as the machines moved around them, taking no notice of the humans within their midst as they stacked the matte black boxes. It was Dave who finally gave voice to the inevitable conclusion. "It's like we're in a gigantic office stationery shop."

Carrie gripped his arm. Their alien guard was returning through a wide doorway. Before it even came close, the screeching began. She squinted as she watched the conversation between it and Dave, the terrible sound digging channels through her brain. The conversation was very brief. The alien glided away and Dave followed. Carrie trotted along after. "How come you can hear that thing and I can't?"

"I don't know," replied Dave, but Carrie noticed he avoided her eyes as he spoke.

"So, did it say where we're going?"

"We have to follow it to the ship's commander."

The passages they went down were wide, square and metallic, so that Carrie felt as if she were walking through air vents. Their footsteps echoed as they walked quickly to keep pace with the zooming paperclip. *What was the commander like?* Carrie wondered, rubbing her arms as a couple of horrible possibilities crossing her mind. *Maybe it looked like a letter opener, or a pencil sharpener?*

As it turned out, the creature that awaited them was even worse than she had imagined. It was a massive rectangular box, lying longest side down, the narrow end facing them. Running right across the front of the machine, from the top to the bottom, was a row of tall, metal teeth.

Dave and Carrie exchanged glances. Carrie gulped. "Shredder," she said.

## Chapter Eight – In the Hold

CARRIE AND DAVE STOOD before the glinting steel maw. To one side of them their mechanical guard hovered. Carrie clamped her hands over her ears, anticipating the noise the shredder commander might make. A deep, reverberating bass shuddered through her. Dave seemed, as usual, to have no problem dealing with the sound, so she left him to the conversation and hoped he could save both their lives.

In an effort to distract herself from her probable imminent death, Carrie concentrated on happy thoughts. She thought about Toodles and Rogue, her animal best friends. Then she remembered they were alone in her flat on Earth, and that she might not be coming back. She decided to think about something else.

Her interview with the giant bug sprang next to mind. She scrabbled for any information that might be useful in their current predicament, but she couldn't recall anything useful. The job didn't even seem to be detective work like the creature had said. It was all very odd. But maybe she'd got something wrong.

Carrie reflected instead on her job at the call centre. Her first day had seemed to go quite well, but as she went over the day's events she developed a strong suspicion that in fact she hadn't done a good job. She hadn't even read, let alone followed, the work manual. It was far too boring, and she could hardly understand a word of what the customers were complaining about. Now, the people she'd told she would help were not going to receive any service, and when the complaints started coming in again, this time they would be complaining about her. Carrie groaned. Another job she had failed at.

Dave's conversation with the shredder seemed to be going on forever. She took a peek. He was gesticulating wildly and seemed upset. She groaned again and shut her eyes.

Silence. Carrie looked at Dave. He had his hands on his hips and seemed thoughtful. "What happened? What did it say?"

Their guard began to leave, and Dave spread an arm wide, inviting Carrie to follow it with him. "Well," he said as they walked, "the commander knew all about us, which was surprising."

"Really? How on Earth did it know who we are?"

"Not us as in you and me, Carrie. Us as in human beings. It knew we were humans."

"Oh. Was that a good thing?"

"Only in the sense that recognising a species that has subjected your own to slavery, persecution, and destruction is a good thing."

"So...not a good thing at all, really."

"No. I tried to explain that the office stationery on Earth probably

wasn't its long-lost cousins, but it wasn't having any of it."

"But how does it know? I mean, that's so weird. Those things haven't been to Earth, surely?"

Dave shrugged. "I'm only reporting what it said. I wasn't the one asking the questions. It was quite aggressive, let me tell you."

Carrie stepped to one side as a huge mechanical alien travelling in the opposite direction zoomed past. "So what's going to happen now?"

"That part I wasn't too clear on. It was reeling off chemicals and percentages." He frowned. "What were they? Oxygen, sixty-five per cent; carbon, eighteen point five per cent; hydrogen, nine point five per cent. It mentioned nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus and a few others. I can't remember the percentages for those, though. What could that be about, do you think?"

*Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen?* The elements and their percentages were tantalisingly familiar, and the others chemicals, too. "I know," she exclaimed, "there was a question on that in The Horse and Hounds Pub Quiz Championship last year. They're the amounts of the main elements in the human body, I'm sure of it." She grinned triumphantly, then her smile faded. As the implications of her realisation sunk in, they were silent for a while.

"Now I know what it meant by atomise," said Dave.

The guard drew to a halt, and a hole opened in the floor of the passageway. From a brief burst of discordant violin music Carrie understood they were to jump in. She peered down. It was a simple metal box. There was no sign of anything that might atomise them as they entered it. She landed safely at the bottom, and Dave followed. The air in the hole was humid and smelled faintly sweet.

"I wonder what they normally keep in here?" asked Carrie.

Dave slumped down in a corner. "Who knows? Printer ink? Glue? After today, I'd believe anything."

Carrie watched him for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry for inviting you to my house. Sorry for getting you involved in all of this."

"It's okay. It isn't like you did it on purpose. And if we're going to be giving apologies, I have one of my own." He looked down.

"What? I don't understand. You haven't got anything to apologise for."

Dave took a deep breath. "I have, actually. It's this." He stood and pulled something from his pocket before holding it out to her. The object was blue, cylindrical and about the length of his palm. It squirmed like a snake. Carrie recognised it immediately as one of the weird instruments in her space detective bag.

"It was wriggling like it wanted to be picked up," said Dave. "I felt sorry for it."

"Oh," said Carrie. "I see. Well, that's still no reason to apologise. I



mean..." Her brows knit. "Hold on, if you were just picking it up, how did it end up in your pocket?"

"I should explain a bit more. You see, I have this condition where —"

Carrie gasped. "You took it. You *stole* it from me. Dave, that's despicable."

"Like I said, I have a condition. I'm sorry, I do try to control myself, but sometimes I can't help it."

"You came to my house as a guest, then you went into my kitchen pretending to put your glass away, and you took something that didn't belong to you. You—you—"

"Now that's not strictly true. I really was putting my glass away. But I saw all that amazing stuff you had, and there was this thing separate from the rest. It was at the edge of the table, like it was about to fall off. I didn't think you'd miss it—"

Carrie crossed her arms. "Hmphhh."

"Look, I said sorry didn't I? And I'm giving it back. Here, you can have it."

Carrie snatched the device from his hand.

"Maybe you'll understand them now," he said. "I think it must be a translator or something, and it was working for me because I had it on me. If you carry it, maybe you'll understand what the aliens are saying."

"Oh, great. A fat lot of good it'll do me now. I'll be able to understand them give the order to atomise me. Thanks a lot, Dave."

Carrie plonked herself down at the opposite end of the cell and put the translator in her pocket. She glared at Dave, whose eyes roamed the cell. Whenever his gaze met Carrie's he looked quickly away. Pulling out his phone he checked it, but he didn't, apparently, have any new messages. He put his phone away and looked round the cell again.

Shifting herself to a more comfortable position on the floor, Carrie's thoughts wandered from Dave's misdemeanour to how many minutes or hours they would have to wait until they were broken down to their constituent elements, and whether it would be painful.

A scuttling sound came from above, unlike anything Carrie had heard up until then on the spaceship. The sound wasn't metallic or mechanical, but it was familiar. It was the sound of many pairs of legs on the floor above them. Ten pairs of legs, in fact. Insect legs with claws at their ends. Carrie stood and looked up at the hatch in the ceiling. It opened, and a large, fanged, bug-eyed head peered in. The jaws stretched wide, and a smaller set of razor-sharp jaws protruded, dripping mucus.

Dave whimpered.

Carrie said, “Boy am I pleased to see you.”

## Chapter Nine – Saved by the Bug

“YOU HAVE AN ELEVATED heart rate and adrenaline levels, according to your translator, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, and you appear to have been placed under arrest. Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a big, big problem. Thanks so much for coming. Can you get us out of here?”

“Possibly, but we must follow the protocols, which I do not believe you have been doing, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. I have diplomatic immunity and free access to the placktoid vessel, but it seems you have not declared your status. Until we can establish that the placktoids are perfectly entitled to imprison you.”

“They weren’t just going to imprison us, they were going to kill us,” said Carrie.

Dave was pressing his knuckles to his mouth.

The bug paused. Its head disappeared and ten pairs of insect legs extended through the hatch. With a clatter, it landed next to Carrie “We must discuss this matter further,” it said.

“So, you get signals from this thing?” Carrie held up the translator.

“All your devices transmit your status while you are in your probationary period. It appears you neglected to read that section of your instruction manual. At first, I was receiving signals from an unknown human, and I thought perhaps you had discarded the device or it had been stolen.”

Carrie narrowed her eyes at Dave, who was squashing himself into a corner.

“I was about to recall it,” the creature continued, “when signals arrived that indicated the translator had re-entered your possession. It was then I perceived your biological status, which indicated you were experiencing extreme difficulties and possibly danger.”

“You can say that again, er...um...what’s your name?” asked Carrie.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager...well, humans cannot express my name, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. It is a series of pheromones. It is a very distinct and, though I say it myself, beautiful series of odours selected by the queen of my—”

“All right, all right. Is there something else I can call you?”

“The closest rendition of my name in English is, I believe, Gavin.”

“Gavin?”

“That is the—”

“Okay, okay. Gavin, can you get them to release us?”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett—”

“Call me Carrie. *Please.*”

“I will attempt to have you released, but the matter is rather delicate. It is unfortunate that this particular conflict was your first assignment. Humans are not well regarded among this species, due to some coincidental resemblances between its various forms and certain Earth artifacts.”

“We found out about that,” said Carrie.

“If you had been wearing your Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniform, the matter would be completely different, of course. The placktoids would have accepted your diplomatic immunity. May I ask why you are not wearing your Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniform?”

“I...er—”

“Carrie,” whispered Dave. “That th-thing...”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t introduce you. Dave, Gavin, Gavin, Dave.” Carrie pulled on an ear lobe. “I didn’t bring my uniform, Gavin. I didn’t have time.”

“And where is your toolbox?”

“I couldn’t bring that, either.”

Gavin chittered. “Transgalactic Intercultural...Carrie. This is not good. This is not good at all. How can you expect to perform your duties without the necessary equipment? And let us not forget you have also brought along an unauthorised companion.”

“Now, wait a minute. That isn’t fair. I didn’t even apply for this job. It isn’t my fault I accidentally sent in an application. I got whisked off to an interview that I didn’t want, with an interviewer who, if I can be blunt, Gavin, scared the life out of me.

“That green mist appeared in my kitchen again and sucked Dave in, and I followed him to help him out. I didn’t know we’d end up in the middle of a war zone, or have to do all this dangerous stuff.” Carrie folded her arms. “I didn’t ask to be a space detective.”

Gavin emitted a series of rapid clicks. “Firstly, you are *not* a space detective, and secondly, if you did not want the position why did you accept it? As I recall, you coerced me into hiring you. Thirdly, you clearly did not read the manual in your toolbox, or you would have known exactly where you were going and what duties you had to perform.”

“I...we...” Carrie sputtered to a stop. “So, can you get us out of here or not?”

“I will try my best.” Gavin reached up with two pairs of legs, and

pulled himself up and through the hatch, which slammed shut. The mucus he left behind on the floor steamed. Carrie rubbed the back of her neck. Dave blinked, and the colour began to return to his face. “What the hell was that?”

“My boss, I think, or something like that. I never really found out.”

“You never...” Dave stood. He walked three steps to the opposite end of the cell and back again, before turning to face Carrie. “How can you not know your job title, or what you’re supposed to be doing, or who your boss is? Do you ever listen to anything you’re told?”

“Calm down, all right? You sound like my ex. I just miss things sometimes. And when that mist first sucked me in, I thought I was dreaming. It was all so stupid—why would I think it was real? Of course I wasn’t paying attention. Anyway, it looks like Gavin might be able to get us off the hook.”

“Yes, I could understand that much. Thank goodness at least one of these aliens speaks English. Well, I hope you’re right. God, I wish I’d never accepted your party invitation. All I want to do is go home and forget about this; pretend none of it ever happened.”

“Me too.” Carrie thought of Toodles and Rogue, her new flat, new job. It had all been going pretty well. She wanted nothing more than to continue with her life back on Earth.

She walked to and fro as the time passed, while Dave leaned in a corner. He didn’t seem to want to talk, and Carrie was still annoyed at him for stealing the translator, so she left him alone with his thoughts. When her legs became tired she sat down.

At last, the sound of insect legs scrabbling on the ceiling signalled Gavin’s return. Their fate had been decided one way or another. Carrie felt the translator in her pocket. She was going to be the one hearing the aliens this time, and Dave could listen to the terrible racket they made.

As they returned to the shredder to find out what was going to happen to them, Gavin explained that, despite their resemblance to Earth stationery, the placktoids were intelligent organisms, though not natives of the planet below.

When they were back with the placktoid commander, Carrie was pleasantly surprised by the translator’s effects. It seemed to eliminate the original sounds of communication—or perhaps prevented her brain from interpreting the auditory signals—and replaced them with English spoken in her mind. In the case of the shredder, the translator modified its speech into a BBC newscaster accent. Carrie couldn’t resist a smirk as in the corner of her eye she saw Dave grimacing and cringing.

Soon after it was clear they were not going to die, Carrie lost track of what the commander was saying during its long speech, though she

was pretty sure it offered no apology for the way they'd been treated. She thought their near-execution warranted at least a mention of regret, but the shredder sounded, instead, rather disappointed.

Reduced to their chemical constituents, it told her, she and Dave might have been useful. Protected by diplomatic immunity they would retain their organic form and be of no practical use to anyone. The Transgalactic Council was welcome to send officers to resolve the dispute, but it doubted they would make any difference, and it could not see how these *humans*—the translator conveyed a disgusted tone—could help.

Gavin was drumming his legs like fingers on a tabletop.

"Gavin." Carrie spoke from the corner of her mouth as the shredder continued without pause. The bug ignored her. "Gavin."

"Shh."

"But—"

"It is very rude to interrupt," whispered Gavin.

"But," said Carrie in an undertone, "we're going home now, right? Back to Earth?"

Gavin didn't answer, and Carrie noticed the room was silent. The shredder had finally stopped speaking and she hadn't heard its last few sentences.

"What happens now?" asked Dave weakly.

A guard zoomed up and hovered nearby, before telling them to follow it.

"We go that way," said Carrie.

"We aren't going to be executed?"

"No."

"Thank goodness," said Dave. "So we're going home at last."

Gavin walked alongside the two humans. "Not at all."

"What?" said Carrie and Dave.

"If I may remind you, you were sent here to resolve this conflict, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett."

Carrie winced.

"Despite an unfortunate start, you are to return to your duties. The placktoids want nothing to do with you at the moment, due your unprofessional behaviour. Instead, their strong suggestion is that you return to the planet surface to speak with the opposing side."

"No, no, no," Carrie exclaimed, waving her hands in front of her. "I don't want to. I give up. I resign. I—"

"I am afraid that is not possible. If you resign now it would make me look very bad in front of my superiors. Very bad. They would question my judgement in recruiting someone unwilling or unfit to perform their proper role in resolving these conflicts. As I explained at

your interview, my position as an employee of the Transgalactic Council is precarious.”

“I don’t care about your position. I want to go home,” cried Carrie. The bug didn’t reply. “Gavin, we want to go home. We have to. Dave shouldn’t even be here. Send us back to Earth.”

Gavin’s head waggled. “I did consider returning your companion, but he may be of some use to you in your first assignment, so I will overlook your indiscretion for now.”

Carrie and Dave continued protesting as they followed the guard. The numbers of placktoids in the corridor increased, inhibiting their passage, until they arrived at the entrance area of the spaceship where the matte black boxes were stacked. As they neared the square hole that led outside, the paperclip began to hum.

Carrie felt herself being lifted into the air. “I’m not going to do it. Put me down you horrible paperclip. Gavin, send me home. Send us home, please.”

“All you need to do,” called Gavin, as Carrie and Dave were carried, squirming, to the centre of the guard, “is to question the ootoon about the placktoid disappearances. When the placktoids discover where their missing members are, they will be more disposed to enter into negotiations and resolve the conflict. You have your translator. With a little patience and concentration you should be able to communicate with the ootoon.”

Writhing against the force field that held her, Carrie drummed with her fists and feet. Gavin’s parting words were faint. “Good luck.”

## Chapter Ten – Death by Custard

IT WASN'T EASY TO REMAIN back to back while floating within the centre of a giant mechanical alien, but Carrie and Dave managed it. From the look on Dave's face, it was clear to Carrie that he blamed her for their predicament, and while that was, she admitted to herself, partly true, she thought he was being harsh. It wasn't as though she intended to involve him. She wanted to go home just as much as he did. And he did steal the translator from her house, so it wasn't as if he was Mr. Perfect.

The planet surface zoomed up towards them at a sickening pace. In a sea of yellow the grey island sat, with its forest of red leaves. The island drew closer and closer until, about four hundred feet above the planet's surface, Carrie realised the paperclip's positioning was wrong. It was returning them to roughly the same area as before but if they continued along their current trajectory, they wouldn't be landing on the island.

"Left," she shouted upwards, though in fact she had no idea what part of the guard contained its hearing facility. "Go left, or..."

Dave followed her gaze downward. All color drained from his face. "No, no, no. Left, left!" The pale yellow, gently heaving ocean drew closer and closer.

"Carrie...Carrie," shouted Dave. "Do something. Make it change course. Carrie, pleeeeeease..." Without a sound, the force field holding them was released, and they tumbled down. "I can't swim."

They hit the liquid, but instead of sinking like stones beneath the surface, their feet penetrated only slightly. The impact sent shock waves up their legs. The thick, gloopy ocean bore their weight. Carrie could hear a droning monotone.

"Phew," said Dave, as he regained his balance, "that was...ahhh!" The firm surface beneath his feet gave way, and he began to sink. Carrie was sinking, too. Flailing and thrashing, Dave sank faster.

Carrie stopped moving, which slowed her descent. The liquid was thick but it became runny in response to rapid movements. "Don't struggle," she called. "It's like quicksand. The more you struggle—"

"Carrie, help me," cried Dave, as his thighs and then his torso began to disappear into the yellow gloop. "Help!" But he was too far away for Carrie to reach.

"Stay still," she shouted. "Stop struggling."

Fully panicked, Dave desperately fought the liquid that was swallowing him, even as his arms and shoulders became covered in the glossy goo.

"For god's sake, Dave, keep still. You're making it worse."



“Carrie, Carrie,” called Dave, twisting violently as his neck began to disappear. He tilted back his head to keep his mouth and nose free.

“Dave,” shouted Carrie.

His eyes rolling, he gasped. He took several short breaths and spoke, his words slow and precise. “I think I’m touching the bottom. On tiptoe.”

Carrie exhaled. “Okay. Now *don’t move*. Do you understand? Not a single muscle.”

Dave spat out the liquid that had oozed into his mouth. “Kay.”

“If I spread my weight over the surface, I bet I can wriggle across. Once you’re in this kind of liquid there’s no point fighting it, you just sink.”

Dave spat again. “I think I’ve discovered that.”

“The shore’s only about ten metres away. Move slowly, and try to work your way upward.” Carrie was already doing this herself, and it was working. Her top half lay across the surface, and she wasn’t sinking. She gently wriggled her legs, easing them free of the gloop.

Dave wasn’t so successful, but he knew where safety lay, and his painstakingly slow movements drew him gradually closer and closer to the shore. Emerging from the yellow ocean, the two flopped down on the dry, dusty sand. Their energy returned, and they stood and ran their hands down their clothes to remove the remains of the yellow goo. Carrie took the translator out of her pocket and placed it on the ground. The ocean’s murmuring ceased.

“You know, I think that paperclip did it on purpose,” said Dave. “Dropping us in the sea I mean. Vindictive little piece of stationery.”

“Not so little,” said Carrie.

Dave was flicking the yellow liquid into the ocean. “My boots,” he exclaimed. The once neatly brushed suede was flat and dark and very, very spoiled.

Carrie held out her arms to dry her sleeves in the breeze. The gloop had been easy to remove, and had left their clothes only slightly wet. Wondering what kind of substance it was, she sniffed her hands. “You know what, this stuff smells the same as the inside of our cell back on the placktoid spaceship.”

Dave took a sniff. “Does it?” he asked. “I can’t say I really noticed.”

Carrie dipped her finger in the ocean, and held it to her nose. “It smells like...” She popped her finger in her mouth. “Mmmm ...” Her eyes widened. “It’s custard.”

“Eurghhh,” exclaimed Dave, “we were just swimming in that.”

Scooping a handful of the liquid, she sucked it up and licked her hand clean. “It’s quite nice. It tastes exactly like the vanilla custard my mum makes.”

“That’s disgusting.” Dave stepped back. “How could you eat it?

Anyway, shouldn't you be contacting those people your bug boss was telling you about? Was it the ootoon he called them?"

"Don't you want to try some? It's lovely and creamy and not too sweet. Brilliant. A whole ocean of custard. Now all we need is some apple crumble."

"There's no way am I eating that."

"Oh well, I'm hungry." Carrie scooped up some more liquid in two hands and began slurping.

"Wait a minute," said Dave. "Don't drink it, you idiot. Just because it tastes like custard, it doesn't mean it is. It isn't likely, is it? We're on an alien planet. That stuff could be poisonous."

Carrie's satisfied expression fell. "You're right. I didn't think of that. Whoops." She opened her hands and the remains of the liquid dripped out. She spat what was left in her mouth back into the ocean. As she turned back to Dave, his eyes focused on something behind her and widened in fear. She only had time to utter, "What's—" before the deluge hit. A wave of custard swamped her, knocking her off her feet. Blinded and smothered in yellow goo, she felt herself being dragged backwards into the ocean.

Her feet touched the floor, and she staggered up, scraping her eyes clear of liquid. She opened them just in time to see a tall tongue of gloop rise up, ready to grab her again. But Carrie's long hours of Bagua Zhang training kicked in, and she reflexively sidestepped, thrusting out a flat, hard palm. As had happened when she and Dave landed upon the liquid, the fast contact created a dense viscosity. Resistance sent a jarring tremor down her arm, but the blow was effective, and the tongue split into two and fell into the ocean, where it was rapidly absorbed.

"Short, sharp, jabs," muttered Carrie as another tongue rose and raced towards her. She punched it squarely in the middle, wincing at the shock. This tongue fell apart and tumbled down, quickly dissipating.

As a third tongue arose, she thought, *Wait, what am I doing?* She was at the shoreline. Maybe all she had to do was move out of reach? A sharp kick destroyed the next attacking wave, and she raced inland before glancing over her shoulder. The ocean didn't seem to be pursuing her. When she was well out of reach she stopped. At the shore edge the yellow liquid flopped towards her, seeming to reach out, and tongues rose and fell, but they didn't, or couldn't, leave the ocean.

Carrie relaxed. She was covered in gloop once more, but she was safe for now. She gazed in wonder at the ocean that looked and tasted like custard but had the instincts of predator. It took her a few moments to realise there was something missing from the scene. Dave.

There was no sign of Dave. She drew in a breath. Scanning the gently heaving waves, she spotted a flailing hand.

“Dave,” she shouted, running back to the shore. But the hand was no longer to be seen. Her heart in her mouth, Carrie gawked at the spot where it had disappeared. A bubble of air burst on the surface, then there was nothing. Not a splash, not a ripple. He was gone.

“Dave.” Carrie whimpered. “Dave.”

## Chapter Eleven – The Oootoon

CARRIE SLUMPED TO THE sand. The alien sea flopped onto the shore and drew back, flopped and drew back. She put her head in her hands. She'd only seen Dave for the first time yesterday. Not twenty four hours had passed since meeting him. He'd winked at her. He'd complimented her bag. He'd brought her cake.

She drew a sleeve across her eyes. If only she had demanded Gavin send him back to Earth, even if he refused to send her. There was no reason for Dave to be involved. None at all. This was supposed to be her job. She wondered if Dave had a partner. He had never spoken of anyone, but he must at the very least have family and friends who would never know what happened to him, and she couldn't tell them, assuming she managed to get home. They would have her locked up.

A sob burst from her, and another and another. Tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her face, cutting channels in the traces of yellow gloop. It wasn't Dave's fault he had come here, it was hers. She should have been more careful. She should have put away the things Gavin had given her, then he wouldn't have seen them. He wouldn't have been tempted to look at them and he might have left the kitchen before the cupboard door opened.

Thinking about the devices she'd left on her table reminded Carrie of the translator. She wondered if she could use it to speak to Gavin, or if it would at least send signals that showed her distressed state. Going home was the only thing on her mind now. If she begged, maybe he would let her. He couldn't refuse now that her companion had died, surely? The thought of spending another second on this planet looking at the ocean that had swallowed her friend, that had become his grave, was unbearable.

When they'd first left the ocean, she'd taken the translator out of her pocket and put it down on the sand. She soon found where she had left it, covered thinly in alien custard. She exhaled. It was a safe distance from the ocean's edge.

Carrie reached down to pick up the translator. As her fingers made contact, a cacophony of outraged squeals erupted in her mind. She snatched her hand away, and stared at the device. Reaching out again, she lightly touched it with her fingertips. Once more, there was a chorus of voices. Upon removing her fingers, the voices stopped.

Kneeling next to the translator, she placed a finger on it and concentrated on what the voices were saying. They were speaking English, but they were so loud and outraged, and there were so many, they were almost incomprehensible. Carrie frowned. Some voices were shrilling *Catch the invader* and *Down with all aliens*, others were

shouting *Victory* and *We got one of them*. Carrie could also make out some quieter voices saying *Our poor citizens* and *Gone forever* and *Eaten by an alien*.

Eaten by an alien? Carrie jerked her finger away. She looked at the custard sea and wiped her mouth. The yellow liquid looked like an ocean. It covered at least half the planet, according to what she had seen from her rides on the placktoid guard. It was the colour and taste of custard, and even had its weird viscosity. But she was the only 'alien' around, and she had definitely eaten some of it. It had never occurred to her...Carrie's stomach squirmed.

Laying a finger on the translator again, the voices instantly started up in her mind. The custard was full of beings communicating telepathically. She wondered if they could also hear her thoughts.

*Hello?* she said in her mind. *Can you hear me?* The voices continued without reaction. *I'm a stranger here. I'm sorry for...Hello?* But as much as she tried, she got no response. The custard creatures didn't seem to hear her at all. She would have to try speaking.

"Hello?" She repeated herself several times at increasing volume, then bellowed.

Some of the closer, louder voices ceased, though a monotonous drone continued in the background. It seemed a few parts of the yellow liquid had heard her. There was shushing, and calls of *Be quiet* and *Shut up, it's speaking*. A single voice piped *Murderer!* before it was silenced.

"Can I speak to someone?" asked Carrie. "I wanted to say, I'm very sorry for, er, accidentally eating one, or several, of you."

Cries of *Killer*, *Criminal*, *He was my best friend* and *How could you?* echoed in Carrie's mind. Her eyes began to fill with tears. "I'm really sorry. I had no idea. Where I come from, we eat something that looks exactly like you, and I just thought you were the same thing. It was...you were..." The words 'delicious' died on her lips.

*That's no excuse* was the majority response, closely followed by *How would you like it if we came to your planet and ate some of you?* and *We don't believe a word of it*.

"Honestly, back on Earth, I would never do such a thing. I'm actually a vegetarian, you know, and I have pets. I love animals."

The outrage this statement provoked was deafening. Carrie removed her finger from the translator in fear her brain would burst. Erratic ripples flowed over the ocean surface. Custard tongues rose up and ran towards her, only to topple uselessly down when they reached the shore edge. Carrie stepped away a few paces, cursing herself.

She folded her arms and bit her lip. There was nothing else for her to do but try again. Gavin wouldn't find out there was something wrong unless he discovered it through the translator, and there

seemed to be no way off this planet without his help. She had to touch the device even if she couldn't get through to the custard ocean. She stepped closer to the translator and placed a toe on it.

"Sorry about that," she shouted several times until the hubbub quietened enough to indicate at least some of the custard was listening. "I didn't mean to say *you're* animals. I just meant, I wouldn't have eaten you if I'd realised you were alive. I don't eat living things, I mean things that once lived, unless you include plants and stuff." Carrie paused. "What I mean to say is, I'm really, really sorry I ate some of you, and if I'd known you were living, and intelligent, and had feelings, I would never have done it. I don't know what I can do to prove it to you, but it's true."

Anger welled up in Carrie. "And you attacked my friend. Why did you do that? He wasn't the one that hurt you; it was me."

A host of ocean voices responded to Carrie's words, and she could not clearly make out what any of them were saying. The tones were angry, measured, conciliatory, outraged, reasoning, and sympathetic all at once, with none louder than the rest. She listened for several minutes, but the voices went on and on and seemed to be in no hurry to come to any kind of consensus or response she could understand. Carrie's mind buzzed with the noise. She lost concentration and gave up.

Leaving the shore to walk and think for a while, images of Dave's flailing hand and the bubble of air, the last air he had breathed, popping on the ocean surface, played over and over in her mind. She pictured his face. He'd tried to make her feel welcome, when no one else in the call center had been friendly. He'd come to her house, thinking she was having a housewarming party. He'd even owned up about stealing the translator. And she had got him killed by eating some of an alien sea.

Carrie reached the edge of the leaf forest where she and Dave had run when the custard ocean was being bombed. She stopped and turned, looking back at the vast yellow expanse. The placktoids had been bombing the ocean, an ocean that could talk and move at will. Of course. It was...it was...what had Gavin called it? The ootoon. The yellow gloop was the other side in the conflict with the placktoids.

Returning to the shoreline, Carrie found the voices had calmed down. There were still so many it was difficult to understand what they were saying, but she could make out some utterances.

*What is it, anyway?* some were asking, and *Why is it here?* and *What should we do with it?* In response to the final question there was a chorus of *Ruin, ruin, ruin.*

Carrie swallowed. "Hello?" she called, and as she spoke many voices quietened down. "I can answer some of your questions if you

like. My name's Carrie. Carrie Hatchett, and I'm a human, from Earth."

*Human, what's that? Earth? Never heard of it. There's no such place. It's making it up. Are they all murderous savages where you come from, then? How strange to go around all separated like that. How do you...you know?*

Carrie's forehead knotted into a frown. She had to speak to the ootoon, but how was she supposed to speak to hundreds, or thousands or millions of them at once? It was impossible, yet there was nothing to do but to try. She set her lips.

"Yes, there really is a planet called Earth," she said. "I don't know where it is, or how I came here from there, but it's my home. The sea there is blue and it isn't alive like you are, but it's full of living things. And the land, well, lots of that is green, but there are also mountains and deserts and icy places where the ground is always frozen. And..." Her voice caught. "And it's very, very beautiful." *And a long, long way away*, she thought.

*Blue sea? What's a sea? Weird. Sounds like a dump. Don't be rude. Where could that be, then? Is it far? So what? Who cares?*

"Anyway," Carrie said, "I'm here to resolve this problem you've got with the placktoids."

*Problem, what problem? Oh, she means the things, you know. Oh those other aliens. What are they? Placktoids they call themselves. Urghh, horrible. Can't stand them. Soon put a stop to their nonsense.*

"So, if we could get on to solving that, I could get out of your way." *And home.*

*Well, it all started long, long ago, when most of us were just drops, isn't that right? I'd say it goes further back than that. Start at the beginning, work your way forward, then stop. No, just tell her the important bits.* The voices continued, with snippets of information here, an anecdote there, and lots of chatter in between. After a while Carrie's attention wandered, and the events of the last few hours began to catch up. Her eyelids began drooping, and her head nodded.

*When we captured the other one, said a voice. The other placktoid? No, the other one like the one here.*

Carrie's head jerked up. The other one like the one here? She was the only alien here. The other one like her was Dave, but the ootoon had said *captured*. Not killed, drowned, destroyed or any other word used to describe taking a life.

"Excuse me," she shouted. "Excuse me. Be quiet, and listen, please, listen to me, it's very important." After a few more attempts, there was a lull in the chatter. "My companion, the other human, is he..." Carrie screwed her eyes shut. "Is he still alive?"

The response was outraged. *Of course it's still alive. What do you*

*take us for, savages?*



## Chapter Twelve – Bubble Passage

A GREAT, RENDING, GASPING sob burst from Carrie. Alive. Dave was alive.

*What's it doing? What's it saying? The words are strange. Those are noises, not words. Urghh, make it stop.*

Carrie stifled her weeping. If Dave was alive, where was he? The custard ocean had swallowed him, and there was no way he could breathe in it.

"Excuse me, excuse me." Carrie tried to interrupt, but the ootoons were too interested in discussing the phenomenon of her crying. She stood. "That's enough," she yelled. "Shut up, won't you? For once, just bloody shut up." The voices dropped to murmur level. Carrie detected a few exclamations of *How rude!* but ignored them. "My friend, where is he? What have you done with him?"

*Does she mean the other one? I think she means the other one. Where is he? What did we do with him? Does anyone know where the other one of the murderous aliens is?*

Carrie shut her eyes and clenched her fists. "Please, would one of you, or some of you, bring him back?"

*Hey, you're not having him. You can't have him, he's ours. If we give him back, you'll start eating us again. He's our hostage, like the others. We're not stupid, you know.*

"Okay, okay. If you won't bring him here, at least take me to him." Carrie regretted the words as they left her mouth. What was she saying? How did she know the ootoons weren't lying? If she allowed them to take her, they could drown her easily. Land was her only place of safety.

*No, that isn't a good idea. Come closer. Come over here and we'll take you. Two—we'll have two of them. Don't bother. What good is that going to do us? Come closer, we can't reach you there.* Tendrils of custard sea oozed up the sand towards Carrie. She stepped back, then hesitated. What choice did she have but to trust the creatures? It was the only chance she had of reaching Dave, and she was desperate to see him and know that he was okay.

Knees trembling, Carrie took a step, then another. Custard snakes slithered over her shoes and up her calves.

*Closer, closer. We can't reach you,* said the voices.

Carrie took another step, and gasped as she was suddenly knee deep in warm custard.

*Deeper, deeper.*

Thigh deep, then in up to her waist Carrie went, her heart thudding. She imagined how terrified Dave must have been when the

custard overwhelmed him. She looked back at the shore, which seemed so dry and safe.

*Under, under, under*, chorused the voices.

Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, Carrie plunged into the ocean, recoiling from the slimy feeling. She gripped the translator. As the ootoon ocean closed over her head, she panicked and tried to swim to the surface to breathe, but she no longer knew which way was up, and if she opened her eyes in the opaque liquid she wouldn't be able to see. Besides, swimming in it would only make her sink. She was enveloped in warm gloop, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Just when Carrie's lungs began to ache and she was giving up hope that the ootoon would keep its word and take her to Dave, the custard drained from her face and the rest of her body. She wiped her eyes and opened one a slit. A dim light surrounded her. She could make out a smooth yellow wall a metre away. Opening her eyes, Carrie saw she was in a custard bubble, and the liquid was glowing with some kind of phosphorescence. She exhaled before taking a test breath. The air smelled sickly sweet.

But where was Dave?

She let out a small squeal as a semi-liquid protrusion rose from the floor and lifted her off her feet. It became a custard chair like a sloppy bean bag, and she sank into it as acceleration pushed her deeper into the liquid. Reaching out to touch the wall of the bubble, she was sprayed by custard. The bubble was moving rapidly. She could still hear the voices of the ootoon, but they were a hum of incoherent sound, like a massive crowd of chattering people passed at high speed.

*How long would it take to reach Dave?* she wondered. It seemed ages since the custard had taken him. *He must be hopping mad by now*, thought Carrie, *or terrified*. A scary thought occurred to her. *Did the custard know humans needed oxygen to survive? Had the air in Dave's bubble run out?*

She wondered how deep beneath the surface she was. Oceans on Earth were miles deep at their deepest points, but the pressure down there was crushing. She didn't feel as though she was very deep. Either she was still close to the surface or the custard was maintaining normal atmospheric pressure around her. Maybe if she angered the ootoon the bubble would collapse and she would be crushed to death.

Her stomach lurched as the bubble decelerated. Pushing a finger into the wall created a lazy wake. She must be nearly there. She steeled herself against what she might see and forced images of Dave's suffocated body from her mind. The wall before her thinned and then dissolved. Her bubble had broken into another, and there was Dave.

He leapt up. "Carrie, I thought you were dead." He hugged her tightly.

"Well, I'm not," squeaked Carrie. "But I may soon..."

"Sorry." He released his grip. "I thought I'd never see you again. Never see another human being." He rubbed a knuckle in his eye. "I thought—"

"I'm the one who should be sorry, Dave." She grabbed his arms. "I wanted to say I'm sorry you're here and involved in all this. I should have told Gavin I wasn't interested. I should have demanded he left me alone. But I thought it was all a dream, you see. Even after I got up the next day and saw all that stuff on my kitchen table, it didn't seem real."

"It's okay, Carrie. It's my fault, too, for being a nosy parker. I should have gone home instead of poking around in your kitchen and looking at your things."

"It doesn't matter. I don't mind. Look, on my way over, I was worrying about the air supply in here. Have you felt dizzy or sleepy or anything?"

Dave shook his head. "Every so often a bubble of air pops open above me and a hole appears in the floor to grab a bubble to take away. The custard seems to understand I need fresh air. Anyway, how did you get here? What's going on?"

Carrie gasped, realising she hadn't heard the ootoons' voices for a while. Where was the translator? She must have dropped it when Dave hugged her. She looked down and saw it half-submerged in the floor. As she touched it, the voices started up again in her head.

"I discovered something. The ocean we're in, it's alive," she said.

"What? I assumed it was being controlled."

"No, listen." She held the translator out to Dave. "It's full of voices communicating telepathically, but they hear us best if we speak."

Dave's eyes bulged as his fingers made contact with the translator. *Catch them. Keep them. Crush them*, shouted some of the voices, but these were only the loudest, not the majority. Quieter voices speculated on who Carrie and Dave were, where they had come from and why they were there. Other voices explained that Carrie had eaten their citizens. *Actually scooped them up and ate them!*

"Urgh...This is impossible to listen to," said Dave, grimacing. "Is there a way of turning this off?" He traced the surface of the translator with his fingers. "Ah, there's something here." He pressed an invisible bump, and the voices stopped. "So it was because you ate some of it the ocean attacked?" Carrie hung her head. Dave's brow wrinkled. "Wait, is this the other alien the placktoids are fighting with?"

"Must be. Gavin called them ootoons, I think. It would explain the explosions in the ocean."

“So why are the placktoids attacking the ootoons?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Your terrifying boss said some of the placktoids were missing.”

“Did he?”

Dave tilted his head and glared at Carrie. “Yes, weren’t you listening?”

“I must have missed that part.”

Her friend grasped his hair with both hands for a moment, then let go. He leaned towards her. “Carrie, this could mean life or death to us. I, for one, want to go home. You need to pay attention.”

“Yeah, that’s a bit of a weak spot with me. I’m more of a visual person, you see. When I read something I remember it, but when people talk to me...”

“Well, do you think you could fix it? Because I intend to get off this planet.” Dave’s lips drew to a thin line.

“All right, there’s no need to go on about it.”

He held up the translator. “Let’s talk to the ootoons and see if we can find out what’s been going on.”

“Okay.”

He held out the device and Carrie grasped it as he turned it on.

*ATTACK ATTACK ATTACK*, screamed the voices.

## Chapter Thirteen – War Zone

AN EXPLOSION NEARBY threw Carrie and Dave to the floor. The bubble walls wobbled violently.

“What the hell’s that?” shouted Dave.

“It must be a bombardment from the placktoids.” Carrie tried to stand as large ripples crossed the floor.

“Seems like—” said Dave as he rose to his feet. Another explosion jerked the bubble and he fell down again. “—the time for negotiation may have passed.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “What if we take a direct hit? What if the bombs break the wall?” She wondered again how deep they were. She touched the wall as she spoke. It had become firmer, almost solid, and rubbery, so that her fingers barely broke the surface. It was as if the ootoons were trying to protect them. Another bomb detonated, and they were thrown to one side. They bounced back from the elastic surface.

Dave staggered upright. “Do the placktoids know we’re here? Are they trying to kill us?”

“I don’t see how they could. Unless they can trace this thing like Gavin can.” She held up the translator. Screams and shouts from it were echoing through her head. She winced. “Poor ootoons.”

Bracing himself against the bubble walls, Dave said, “Carrie, you have to do something.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“What can you...? You’re the Liaison Officer, or whatever. It’s your job to sort this out. That’s why you’re here.”

“But I don’t have the first clue what’s going on.”

“Then you need to find out.”

“But...I...” Carrie was about to protest that she’d tried to find out the important information and solve the dispute, but in fact she couldn’t think of anything she’d done other than try to go home. Dave was right. She should do something. It was her job. She had agreed to it. All for the sake of a stupid handbag.

An ear-bursting concussion resounded from outside, and there was an ominous bulge in the bubble wall.

“CARRIE.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do something.”

Holding the translator in both hands, she brought it close to her lips. She wasn’t sure it would make any difference, but maybe it would help her to be heard above the explosions and shouts and cries of the ootoons.

“Listen, please listen to me,” she shouted. “You’ve made a mistake.

I've been sent here to sort out your dispute, by the..." She looked at Dave. He raised his eyebrows and spread his hands. "By the Transgalactic...Council? I'm not wearing my uniform, sorry. But I'm here to help you. Take us back to land. Take us back to the shore. Please."

A double explosion rocked the bubble, and Carrie fell down. It was impossible to remain standing on the undulating floor. At first it didn't seem her words had been heard. From the ootoons she could hear nothing but shouts of pain and anger, but then she heard *Transgalactic Council*. Another voice repeated the words, and another, until the words echoed in her head. Protrusions rose from the floor that lifted them from their feet.

"We're moving," said Dave. "I can feel it."

Slowly, then faster, the bubble walls began to flow past, and the voices from the translator merged into a speeding gibberish. Carrie thumbed the translator off. The voices were giving her a headache and she couldn't comprehend a single word.

"Looks like they heard you," said Dave, "and believed you."

"Yes, maybe, or maybe they decided to take us somewhere else."

"Out of the bombardment zone?"

"Yes, to protect us."

"Or kill us."

Carrie shook her head. "They could have done that as soon as they got us below the surface. If anything, they've gone to some trouble to keep us alive, maybe just as hostages of course. But when I suggested they'd killed you they were outraged. Accused me of thinking they were savages."

"Some of them certainly sounded like they wanted us dead."

Carrie nodded. "Only some, though."

"Do you really think they'll let us go?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do if they take us back to land?"

"I don't know that, either."

Dave rolled his eyes.

Carrie wondered how she was going to solve the dispute between these alien species. It was difficult to come up with a solution when she didn't know what the details of the problem were. The placktoids must be bombing because, according to Gavin, some of them had gone missing and they blamed the ootoons. How could the ootoons take them, though? The placktoids had spaceships, weapons and other technology—dammit, they *were* technology.

"It's got to be the placktoids' fault," said Carrie.

"Why?"

"How could the ootoons hurt them? How could it capture them?"

“Well, they captured us and could have severely hurt us if they’d wanted to.”

“We’re not machinery.”

“Are the placktoids machinery?” asked Dave. “You don’t know. You’re making assumptions. They might have some living parts. Or there might be baby paperclips that the ootoons were hurting. Yes, the placktoids were raising their babies and the ootoons came along and swept them away, or something like that.”

Carrie lifted an eyebrow. “Okayyyyy. So, how could ootoons have taken them? The placktoids are in a spaceship. How could the ootoons reach all the way up there?”

Dave rubbed his chin. “You’ve got a point...Unless the baby paperclips were playing on the beach?”

Carrie gazed at Dave for a silent moment.

“Or maybe not?” he said.

Carrie folded her arms. “It’s the placktoids’ fault, I’m sure of it. They were the ones who were going to execute us, remember? And we hadn’t done a single thing to hurt them. But the ootoons didn’t harm me or you at all, even though I actually ate some of them. If some of the placktoids have gone missing, I bet the ootoons have nothing to do with it. Or maybe the placktoids are lying because they want an excuse to attack.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“*You* don’t have to be convinced. *I’m* the Transgalactic Intercultural...space detective, so it’s my call. I bet the placktoids can’t prove the ootoons have done anything to hurt them.”

“I hope you’re right. I just want this all to be over.”

“Me, too. I’ll do this one job, then, when I get home, I’m going to dig a hole in a field somewhere and bury all that equipment Gavin gave me. And the next thing I’m going to do is get some nails, and hammer shut that door under my sink.” Carrie raised her arms for balance. “Whoa, we’re slowing down.”

The deceleration was rapid. As the bubble wall opened in front of them, the protrusions they were sitting on rose swiftly up and ejected them through the gap. They landed face downward on the pale grey, gritty shore, not far from where the ootoons had taken them.

“I hate this job so much,” said Carrie, sitting up and rubbing her nose.

“It has its disadvantages,” said Dave, blinking in the daylight and surveying the sticky, yellowish material that had once been his clothes.

An explosion. A giant custard plume erupted. Wet, slimy ootoons rained down on them.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire,” shouted Dave. The ootoons

had brought them back to the beach as requested, but not out of the bombardment zone. Another bomb hit close by, and ootoons were splattered over the beach. The large jellied balls that landed close to the ocean oozed quickly down into it, but the ones farther from the shoreline began to darken, dry and shrink.

“Look,” said Carrie, pointing at the drying lumps, “I don’t think they can survive cut off from the rest of the ocean.” They ran to the globs to try to help them return to the sea. Dave lifted one but his fingers slipped through. He pushed it, but his hands sank uselessly in. Separated from the rest of the liquid, the ootoons didn’t seem to have the ability to change their viscosity.

“You have to hit them hard,” said Carrie. “Do that and the liquid resists. Like when we landed on it. See, like this.” She smacked a glob hard, and the material shuddered and slid a short distance along the sand. “Kicking probably works better.” She aimed a sideways swipe with her foot, and the glob slipped closer to the ocean’s edge.

“Got it,” said Dave, and he began punching and kicking a blob for all he was worth. In a few minutes it touched the custard sea, melted, and flowed into it.

As the bombing continued, Dave and Carrie worked steadily to return the displaced ootoons to their fellows. They worked for longer than half an hour until the bombs finally stopped. The two humans flopped down in exhaustion. They’d done their best, but some of the globs farthest from shore had dried completely and showed no signs of life.



## Chapter Fourteen – Carrie’s Replacement

“WE DID OUR BEST,” SAID Carrie.

Dave turned his head. He sniffed and blinked, and wiped a finger under his eye. “This needs to stop, Carrie.”

“I know.”

“Then do something.”

“I’m trying.” Carrie stood. In the distance was the red leaf forest. The custard sea flopped and withdrew, flopped and withdrew, no trace of the recent bombardment visible on its glossy surface. Everything had returned to normal. The only signs of damage were the dried remains of ootoons on the beach. Yet Carrie couldn’t forget the shouts and cries of the victims. She needed to talk to Gavin and get him to help her force the placktoids to stop the bombing. She would demand they show evidence the ootoon had taken their missing members. She took out the translator. Maybe she could figure out how to use it to communicate with Gavin.

“Are you going to talk to the ootoons?” asked Dave. “You need to find out their side of the story, remember?”

“Oh, come on, Dave, you’ve heard the mass of chatter that stands for ootoon communication. I tried listening to their side of the history of the conflict before I found out they hadn’t drowned you. It was gobbledogook. Incomprehensible. And we haven’t got all the time in the world.”

“I think you can do it. You’ve made some headway already.”

But Carrie shook her head.

“What’s that?” asked Dave.

Carrie followed the direction of his gaze. He was looking towards the boulder. A patch of green mist was forming in front of it. The faint spot of colour grew wider and deeper, and began to glow and spin. Dave stood.

Carrie gripped his arm. “That looks like...”

A leg appeared through the mist. It was long, shapely, and womanly, and it was clothed in fluorescent orange. A firm, curvaceous buttock followed the leg, joined by another buttock and another leg. An hourglass torso began to appear, and shoulders. A woman appeared, clad in a perfectly fitting orange jumpsuit. A mane of tawny hair hung down, so that it was impossible to see her face. As the mist faded, the statuesque female stood upright. She shook back her hair, revealing even features and a finely chiselled bone structure.

As she scanned the surroundings, the woman’s eyes alighted on Carrie and Dave, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, but moved quickly on. Over her shoulder was an attractive designer handbag, which she

opened. She pulled out a translator, glanced once more at Carrie and Dave and turned her back before speaking into the device.

“Wow,” said Dave.

“I know,” exclaimed Carrie. “How rude.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Huh?” Carrie looked from Dave to the woman, who was deep in conversation, and back again. “But you’re...?”

“I may be gay, Carrie, but I’m not blind.”

“I suppose she is a bit, I don’t know, drop dead gorgeous.” Carrie frowned. “But what’s she doing here?”

“She’s got all the stuff you have: a handbag, a jumpsuit like the one that was on your table, a translator. She’s doing the same job as you of course.”

“But...” said Carrie, “but *I’m* doing this job. What’s *she* doing here? And why won’t she say hello?” The woman was scanning the sky. She began walking away. “Where’s she going?”

“I don’t know. There’s nothing that way but forest. Maybe she’s going to try and find a placktoid to talk to?” Dave grabbed her arm. “Carrie, look.” In front of the blasted boulder, the green mist had reappeared. It was thickening and swirling into a spiral. “Do you think that’s an exit? A way for us to go home?” He tugged her arm. “Come on, let’s go.” He ran towards the hole, checked over his shoulder, then stopped and turned. Carrie hadn’t left the spot. “Come on. What’s wrong?”

She found her legs reluctant to move. “We don’t know where it goes. It could lead anywhere.”

“I don’t see why. It isn’t like these things appear randomly. Gavin must have created it so we can leave. It makes sense. That woman’s been sent to replace you. The job’s over, Carrie. We can go home.”

Still her legs felt like lead. Her pride and annoyance seemed to be gluing her to the sand. She folded her arms and set her lips. “You go if you want to. I’m staying.”

Her friend hesitated at the edge of the mist. “But why? Don’t you want to get back? Aren’t you tired of all this? Your pets must be missing you by now. ”

Carrie’s mouth twisted. He was right. She was worried about Toodles and Rogue, but they would just have to wait a little longer. She went to Dave’s side. The green mist lifted and pulled at her hair, but she resisted.

“All my life, Dave,” she said, “all my life I’ve never been able to hold down a job. Even a crappy temporary job. I don’t know why, but things always go wrong for me. And I think I’ve messed up the call centre job, too. But this job...maybe I can do this. I don’t want to give up yet. Maybe I can stop this war between the ootoons and the

placktoids.”

Dave ran his hands through his sticky hair and looked longingly at the mist. He looked at Carrie and rubbed the back of his neck. The edges of the mist were fading and the hole was beginning to contract.

“But you go,” said Carrie. “You don’t need to stay. I can do it on my own. I think I can, anyway.”

Dave’s eyes lifted skyward. The hole was smaller now, barely wide enough for a person to pass through it. He spoke to the ground. “I didn’t want to say this, Carrie, but that woman looks like she knows what she’s doing. She’s an experienced professional, and this is a serious situation. We saw the ootoons dying today. They need someone to put an end to the conflict. Maybe you should leave her to it.”

Her voice trembling, Carrie replied, “You should go now if you’re going, before it’s too late.”

There was a silence. Dave looked wistfully at the mist. The spiral grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. He hung his head and sighed. “No, it’s okay. I’ll stay.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.” Carrie threw her arms around him. “I know what you were saying is right. I know that woman’s a professional and I’m not. But I can’t give up and walk away again. I just can’t. We have to help the ootoons, don’t we? Who knows what she’s going to do? She hasn’t even tried to talk to them yet.”

“Yes, I suppose. But I still think all this stuff is way beyond you and me.” He squinted into the sky. “If we are staying, maybe we need to hitch a ride on that?” He pointed at something swooping down so fast its outline was a blur. Carrie could make out the shape, however. It was rectangular, with curved edges and a hollow centre. It was a guard from the placktoid mothership.

Below it, the beautiful woman waited.

## Chapter Fifteen – A Difference of Opinion

“HOLD ON,” SHOUTED CARRIE to her orange-jumpsuited replacement. “Wait for us. We’re coming, too.”

The blur of the mechanical alien sharpened as it came nearer. It was slowing and angling its flight towards the woman, who hadn’t reacted to Carrie’s shout.

“I said, wait.” Carrie was running now, with Dave close behind.

Glancing over her shoulder and back up at the guard, the woman looked as if she was hoping it would arrive before Carrie did. The air began to vibrate with a low, barely perceptible hum as the alien drew to a halt. It hovered just above the ground a short distance from the woman, who was now walking towards it.

“Stop, don’t leave without us,” yelled Carrie.

Not stopping, nor even pausing, the woman lifted her foot to step into the placktoid’s centre when Carrie’s dive almost, but not quite, knocked her off her feet. Carrie bounced and fell.

“Wow, you’re solid,” she said as she sprawled on the ground.

Staggering upright, the woman frowned. She stepped away from the paperclip and folded her arms. “What on Earth are you doing?” she asked, curling her lip.

“We’re coming, too,” said Carrie. “I’m a space liaison thingy as well. I’m going to speak to Gavin, or the placktoids.”

“Er, no, I don’t think you are.” She turned towards the waiting placktoid.

Carrie leapt up and stood in front of the woman, her arms straight by her sides. “What are you doing here, anyway? I’m the person responsible for settling this conflict.”

“Not any more, you aren’t. Now, excuse me please, I have a job to do.” The woman sidestepped Carrie, who reinserted herself into her path.

“No, you haven’t. It’s my job,” she said.

Dave lingered close by.

“It was your job,” said the woman. “You failed, and now I have to come in and clean up your mess.”

“That’s not true,” exclaimed Carrie. “I haven’t failed. I was just...I was just...gathering information from the custard, I mean, the...” she waved towards the ocean, “the ootoons.”

“Hmpf, you clearly have no idea what you’re talking about, or what you’re doing. And, by the way, it’s ootoon, singular. Please step aside, the placktoids are waiting.”

“We were calling them to get us...anyway. I have important questions for them.”

“Oh really. Where’s your equipment? And why aren’t you wearing your uniform?”

“I—I— ” Carrie’s shoulders slumped. The woman smirked. Carrie’s mouth shut like a trap and stamped her foot. “Dammit, that’s none of your business.”

Her expression softening, the woman smiled and leaned down. “Look, it’s all right. Not everyone is cut out for this job. You toddle off home now and get a good night’s sleep. In the morning you can pretend none of this happened, and you can continue your boring little life in whatever boring little corner of the world you come from. Okay? Do you want me to ask Gavin to open a gateway for you?” She reached into her bag.

Carrie pushed up her sleeves and clenched her fists. “You aren’t getting on that paperclip without us.”

Tipping back her head, the woman laughed. “And I suppose you’re going to stop me? Like you did just then? Or are you going to get your boyfriend here to do your fighting?”

Dave tutted and rolled his eyes.

“I was trying to avoid hurting you then. But now I’m warning you, I’m trained in Bagua Zhang. And Dave isn’t my boyfriend.”

Momentary indecision flickered in the woman’s eyes, then her expression firmed. “I don’t care what you’re trained in. You’re still a little pipsquea—”

The air rushed from the woman’s lungs as Carrie jabbed her in the stomach with rigid fingers. She staggered, her mouth open and gasping.

“Carrie,” exclaimed Dave, “I don’t think there’s any need for that kind of behaviour.”

“It’s okay, I’ve just winded her. Come on.” She went to board the paperclip.

But Dave walked over to the woman and put a hand on the shoulder. She was bent double, her hands on her knees, struggling for breath. “Are you all right?”

“Dave,” shouted Carrie.

“I’m just checking you haven’t hurt her.”

“She’s fine. If I’d wanted to hurt her, I would have. Let’s go before she recovers.”

Dave hesitated. “If you’re sure...she looks a bit pale.”

Flinging back her hair, the woman bared her teeth at Carrie as she took in great gulps of air.

“Come on, Dave, quick.”

“I really think we’d better—”

A fluorescent orange blur flew at Carrie, who sidestepped the woman’s force and caught her off-balance with a shoulder to her

middle. The woman lifted into the air and glided over Carrie's head, landing on her back with a whump. She lay at Carrie's feet, winded again.

"Whoa," said Dave.

"Now, will you—owww!" The woman had sunk her teeth into Carrie's ankle through her trouser leg. "Arghhh...let go." She shook her leg, but the woman clung on. Carrie reached down, grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm. With a cry, the woman released her bite and leapt to her feet. Carrie stepped back. The two women began to circle.

"Back off," said Carrie. "I'm not playing anymore."

"You caught me off guard. You won't get away with it a second time."

"We only wanted to hitch a ride with you on the paperclip."

"It's a placktoid, you idiot. Stop calling it a paperclip. Better yet, go home, where you belong."

Dave stepped between the women, both hands raised. "You know, I'm sure we can talk about this, if we all calm down and behave reasonably."

"I'm not the one being unreasonable," said Carrie. "I only wanted a lift."

"Give up and go away," said the woman through gritted teeth.

Carrie darted forward, and Dave jumped out of the way. She threw out her foot, trying to hook the woman's leg from under her, but she scooted back. They circled again. As Dave backed farther away Carrie dashed in once more with a kick, but the woman grabbed her foot and dragged her forward, hopping. She wrenched Carrie's leg so she was forced to hop closer, and swung a fist, but Carrie leaned back. The fist missed her jaw by a hair's breadth.

Dave put his hands to his face. "There's no need for all of this. You're both totally overreacting."

Carrie was still hopping. With a grunt, she leapt and turned 360 degrees in midair, breaking the woman's grip. As she landed, she leapt again, flinging her leg upwards and kicking the woman in the head. After landing heavily on her bottom, the woman sat swaying and blinking.

"Dave, come on," called Carrie as she turned and ran for the placktoid.

He was just behind her as she jumped into the centre. The forcefield gripped them and they floated, bouncing gently to and fro. Their entrance seemed to trigger a reaction in the mechanical alien. Its humming intensified, and it began to rise. A few feet away the woman lurched up, wobbling. She shouted something, but the sound didn't penetrate the forcefield. Her long stride brought her over

quickly, but not quickly enough. Leaping, she reached for the edge of the placktoid as it ascended. Her fingers grasped air, and she dropped to the ground.

Carrie and Dave watched her figure grow smaller as she shook an angry fist at them. Carrie smiled and waved. Dave frowned at her. Carrie tried to look serious, but her smile broke into a grin. "You're both totally overreacting," she said. She put a hand over her mouth, and with a great snort, she began to laugh. She bent double and gripped her sides.

Dave's lips twitched, his frown melting as a smile forced its way onto his face. His smile broke into laughter, and as the alien zoomed upwards, Carrie and Dave clung to each other in fits of giggles, wiping their eyes and struggling to draw breath.

Above them, the black shape of the placktoid spaceship grew larger, a beam of brilliant light shining from the open hatch in its base. Carrie and Dave were still laughing when the alien disgorged them into the loading bay of the spaceship. They collapsed to the floor, gasping and groaning.

Gavin was awaiting them, his hundred eyes fixed on their rolling forms. Carrie caught sight of him, and her giggles weakened until they finally faltered and died.

## Chapter Sixteen - Belinda

DRUMMING THE GROUND with his legs, Gavin emitted a long series of musical clicks.

Carrie and Dave glanced at each other. Despite not understanding a syllable of what Gavin was saying, they both felt compelled to lower their heads like naughty schoolchildren. Carrie wasn't sure if Gavin was communicating with someone—or something—she couldn't see, talking to himself, or just seething.

She pulled her face into a serious and, she hoped, professional expression. "I wanted to report that I've investigated the—"

"Where is Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham, Transgalactic Intercultural—"

"I don't know who you mean."

Gavin clicked again. "The question was rhetorical. I know exactly where she is. She is aboard the second transport the placktoid commander had to send out, due to the fact that the first transport was misappropriated by you."

Carrie swallowed. "Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that. What's she doing here? This was supposed to be my job. You were going to send me back to Earth without giving me a chance to do it."

"Nonsense. You have had numerous opportunities to ascertain the points of contention on the opposing sides. Your performance so far has consisted of arriving for duty out of uniform, lacking nearly all essential equipment, and accompanied by an unauthorised companion. After your arrival, you failed to contact the ootoon. When picked up by the placktoids you did not explain the official nature of your presence, resulting in your confinement under sentence of execution. Upon your return to the planet surface, you antagonised the ootoon and were taken into confinement once more." Gavin's extendable inner jaws protruded an extra couple of inches. "You have made no progress in resolving this dispute. Hostilities have recommenced. Naturally I had no option but to return you to Earth. This is not a game. Lives are at stake. This conflict must be resolved, and you have singularly failed to resolve it."

Carrie opened her mouth and closed it twice, before saying, "I have made progress. I've been talking to the ootoons, and they're friendly, not aggressive. They protected us from the bombardment even though they had no idea who we were. And how could the ootoons harm the placktoids anyway? They can't reach up here. The placktoids have been bombing it for no reason."

Gavin was clicking again. "No reason? The ootoon, which is considered a single organism, by the way, has abducted placktoid



settlers. That has been established, or I would not have stated it as a fact when you returned to the planet surface. The ootoon attacks any placktoids that stray near its shore.”

“Really? Why?”

Gavin leaned closer, so that his inner jaws were inches from Carrie’s face. She drew back her head.

“That,” he said, “is what everyone would like to know.”

“Hold on,” said Dave, “we were bombed down there. Aren’t the placktoids in danger of bombing their own people if they’re still alive...or functioning, or whatever?”

Gavin swung round to face Dave, who stumbled back.

“The placktoids have little value for individuals of their species who are not available for recycling. In placktoid culture, a placktoid that has left its colony is considered useless and therefore expendable.”

“So why bother attacking?” asked Carrie.

Gavin swung back to her. “For revenge, and to deter the ootoon from capturing any more of them. All of which you would know if you had consulted the briefing device in your toolbox.”

“Which is what *I* did, of course,” came a woman’s voice. Carrie’s replacement had arrived and was stepping down from a hovering placktoid. “Hello, Gavin.”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham,” said Gavin, “thank you for agreeing to step in.”

“I’m always happy to help. I see you’ve been disciplining the little flake. Not a moment too soon. I’m here to report that while I was waiting for the second transport to arrive,” the woman glanced sideways at Carrie, “I took the opportunity to speak further with the ootoon. It’s a belligerent entity that holds an unprovoked hatred for the placktoids. In my opinion there’s little hope of any settlement in this dispute. The ootoon should be subject to sanctions and forced to return the placktoid hostages, assuming they’re still alive.”

“What? No,” exclaimed Carrie, “you’ve got it wrong. The ootoon is nothing like that. You just didn’t listen to it long enough. And what do you mean you spoke further with it? You were going to come up here without speaking to it at all.” She turned to Gavin. “The ootoon’s very difficult to understand, with so many competing voices. It’s always arguing with itself because it’s many, many beings in one.”

“Approximately four and a half billion, if we are talking planetwide,” said Gavin, “and yet, at the same time, a single massive entity. A very interesting and nearly unique life form.”

“And particularly antagonistic,” said the woman.

“Look,” said Carrie, “I don’t know who you are, but I’d be grateful

if you'd stop shoving your oar in."

The woman smirked. "The name's Belinda. So pleased to meet you, whoever you are. No, really," she held up a hand as Carrie opened her mouth, "don't bother telling me your name. You won't be around long enough for it to be worth my while learning it. Gavin, I believe the case here is solved. I studied the Council's inspection report, and the placktoids' claim that they have been subjected to unprovoked attacks ever since attempting to settle on the ootoon planet—"

"There's your answer," exclaimed Carrie, "the placktoids are trying to take over the ootoon's world. It's only natural that it fights back."

"Didn't you read *any* of the information you were given?" asked Belinda.

Gavin was clicking again. "The placktoids have been granted permission to settle on the land areas of the planet. The ootoon has no use for them and there is no other sentient life. But, after agreeing to the settlement plans, the ootoon began kidnapping placktoids."

"Unprovoked?"

"As far as we can ascertain."

Carrie looked at Dave. "That doesn't sound right, does it?" He had wandered to the hatchway and was looking out of it. He shook his head. Carrie turned to Gavin and Belinda. "When we were there, after the paperclip dropped us in the ootoon—deliberately, I'm pretty sure—it let us out untouched. We didn't even know it was alive. It was only when I accidentally ate some of it—"

"You ATE some of it?" said Gavin.

Carrie sighed. "It was a mistake, okay?"

Belinda shook her head and tutted. "Gavin, isn't there some way to force this woman and her friend to return to Earth? She's terrible at her job and she's complicating everything with her ineptitude."

"It was only when it was provoked," continued Carrie, heavily, "that it attacked. And even then it didn't harm us, it only confined us. It tried to protect us from the bombing, and it let us go when I explained who I was and why I was there. It set us free despite what I'd done."

"That the ootoon are holding several hundred placktoids hostage is well established," said Belinda. "The ootoon provided no coherent explanation when I questioned it—"

"That's because it can't communicate clearly."

Gavin whirred. "Transgalactic translators are highly effective—"

"That isn't the point," exclaimed Carrie. "Every single one of the ootoon parts speaks at once. I don't know exactly how it works, but it seems that when there's a consensus between enough of them, the ootoon acts. But in terms of talking with it one-to-one, forget it."

"The Transgalactic Council is aware of the unusual communication

method of the ootoon,” said Gavin.

“Well, I certainly managed to communicate with it,” said Belinda.

“No, you didn’t,” said Carrie.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You didn’t have enough time—”

“How dare you,” said Belinda. “Gavin, is this kind of behaviour acceptable? She’s actually accusing me of lying!”

“Yes, I am sorry to say I think you are correct, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham. Carrie, your behaviour and attitude are entirely inappropriate for someone in your position. I am formally informing you that your employment is terminated. This will cause me severe embarrassment in front of my superiors, but I am afraid it is unavoidable. If you do not return to Earth I will have to force you.”

Belinda tilted her chin and looked down her nose at Carrie, who clenched her fists.

“I’m not going anywhere—”

An alarm ripped through the air. The three humans covered their ears, and Gavin flipped onto his back. His ten pairs of legs jerked and wriggled. From all corners of the entrance area, placktoids began speeding towards the door.

“What’s going on?” yelled Carrie, though she couldn’t hear herself above the din.

Dave beckoned her over to the hatch, and pointed down. At first, Carrie couldn’t make out what he was pointing at against the yellow background of the planet, but then she saw it, zooming up towards them at an astonishing speed: A massive blob of ootoon.

## Chapter Seventeen – The Ootoon Fights Back

BELINDA JOINED THEM. All three looked down as, silently and swiftly, the yellow blob of ootoon grew larger. The placktoids continued to hasten out of the door. Carrie grabbed Dave's arm and motioned to the departing machines.

The alarm stopped, but the placktoids continued streaming out.

"Hmpf, so the ootoon's harmless?" said Belinda. "What do you think *that's* going to do when it gets here? Cuddle us?"

Carrie bit her lip. "Maybe, just to be on the safe side, we should get out of here."

"Yes, let's go," said Dave.

But Gavin was still on his back, wriggling.

"Hold on. We can't leave Gavin," Carrie said. As she spoke, the last placktoid reached the door. It disappeared through, and the door slid shut. The only remaining signs of the mechanical aliens were the stacks of black boxes they had left behind. The three humans and Gavin were alone.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Dave, looking at the incapacitated bug.

"Don't you know anything, you two?" said Belinda. "His aural sensory organs were overloaded by the alarm. In his species they're very sensitive. He's still recovering."

"Maybe we can push him?" suggested Carrie. "But can we even get out?" She ran to the door. It wouldn't open no matter how much she pushed or dragged the smooth surface. The surrounding wall was also smooth, with no buttons or other means of unlocking the door. There was nothing to be done but to return to the hatch and watch the ootoon approach.

The yellow blob was larger. Carrie estimated they had only minutes before it reached them. She wondered what it would do when it arrived. She also wondered if her earlier defence of the ootoon might have been misguided.

"Wait a minute," said Dave, "can't Gavin start up the mist, like he did when we were on the planet? Isn't that how he came to this ship? We can escape that way. Go back to Earth, or wherever. Just somewhere that isn't here."

"Yes," exclaimed Carrie. "Great idea." She went to Gavin, whose legs were still wagging weakly. His multi-eyed head lolled from side to side. "Gavin, please, can you open a gateway? We have to get out of here. There's going to be a fight. "

Gavin clicked and chittered. He said something that sounded like, "Too loud, too loud."

“Damn,” said Belinda.

“Can’t you do, it then, with your equipment?” Dave asked Belinda.

“Of course not. Movement between planets is restricted in the same way that movement between countries is restricted on Earth. You can’t just travel from world to world. Only authorised officials can create gateways.”

“Wow,” said Carrie, “look at that.” She was back at the hatchway, craning over it. A bolt of light had left the placktoid ship. The bolt tore through the centre of the ootoon mass. A hole gaped for a moment, then the liquid oozed inwards and sealed it. The ootoon was solid again. As the three humans watched, another placktoid bolt struck the same place, and once more the ootoon sealed the hole. Another bolt and another struck, and each time the ootoon repaired the damage, though blobs of custard were breaking off and floating away into space.

Carrie wrung her hands. “Poor ootoon.”

“Poor ootoon?” said Belinda. “You have noticed we’re being attacked, right?”

“It’s attacking the placktoids, not us, and it must have a very good reason—” She gasped. “Oh no.”

The bombardment from the ship had succeeded in splitting the large mass of ootoon in two.

“Yes,” cried Belinda. “We got it.”

“Not quite,” said Dave. The two halves had reached out to each other and were oozing slowly together.

“Hah,” said Carrie, and threw Belinda a triumphant look.

Another blast severed the ootoon in half again. The bombardment intensified, and the halves became quarters.

The placktoids were succeeding in breaking the ootoon apart, but they did not slow its pace. The ootoon quarters continued to fly towards the placktoids’ ship at the same speed, and continued to draw closer together. The placktoids’ weapons attacked each part separately, driving holes through them, which oozed relentlessly closed.

“Noooo,” said Carrie, her hand over her mouth.

“Honestly,” said Belinda, “anyone would think you wanted the ootoon to succeed.”

“It isn’t aggressive. You don’t know it like I do.”

“Not aggressive? What do you call that lump of death and destruction flying towards us? I bet you haven’t even read the history of the conflict, let alone the species profile on the ootoon.”

“Look,” said Dave. The ootoon was in multiple pieces now, and it was slowing down. But still it came on.

“I’ve spent time with it,” said Carrie. “You couldn’t have listened to

it for more than a few minutes. You just read the placktoids' side of the story and assumed that was all there was to it."

"For goodness sake, it's a barely intelligent species. I have no idea why the Transgalactic Council list it as a civilisation. And it's captured and probably killed hundreds of placktoids who were legitimately settling on unused land."

"Says who?"

"The placktoids, of course. The ootoon is hardly going to admit to it."

"And you believe them?"

"I read the official report. It's there in black and white."

"But it was written from the placktoids' viewpoint."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because the ootoon doesn't communicate like you and me."

"Wh-what's happening?" Gavin flipped onto his front and straightened his twenty legs. He stood unsteadily. "I remember some kind of—"

"The ootoon is attacking the ship," said Belinda. "You have to open a gateway to allow us to escape."

"Oh I see. That is what the alarm was about, was it?" Gavin lurched over to the others at the hatchway.

"How on Earth is it doing that?" asked Carrie. "Flying up here, I mean."

"I have no idea," replied Gavin. "But I agree we should leave the scene of the conflict. Now, let me see." He retracted his inner jaws and his head wobbled from vertical to horizontal.

"Woah," said Dave. He stepped back from the hatch. "It's made it." A custard-yellow mound of ootoon bulged up and into the room.

"No," shouted Belinda. "Hurry up, Gavin, hurry up. Before it surrounds the ship."

But the bug was still groggily waving his feelers in the air. His inner jaws moved in and out.

"What's the hurry?" asked Carrie.

"You can't open a gateway within the ootoon," said Belinda. "It throws out some kind of counteracting field. Nothing can get out from inside it. If it surrounds us we'll have no hope."

"Now then, where was I?" said Gavin. "Oh, I remember, a gateway, that was it."

A circle of green mist began to form. It brightened and became thicker. A spiral began to swirl into being. Belinda lifted her bag higher on her shoulder and stepped up to be first through. But then the mist thinned and the spinning slowed. The three humans watched in dismay as the spiral faded and sputtered out.

Belinda swore. "Great. Just great. Now we'll never get out of here."

Above them, the placktoid ship's brilliant lights blinked out and were replaced by a dull red glow. Beneath her feet, a vibration that Carrie had not noticed before, which she assumed must be the ship's engines, stopped.

## Chapter Eighteen - Trapped

“OH DEAR,” SAID GAVIN, his head returning to vertical.

Belinda folded her arms before sitting down with a thump.

“Don’t worry, everyone,” said Carrie. “The ootoon won’t hold us. It’ll set us free, like before.” She turned on her translator.

Voices blasted into her mind. *Victory, victory. The ship is ours. We won, we beat them. Fight the placktoids.*

“Hello?” she said. “I’m the Transgalactic Council Officer you were holding before. Do you remember? There are three humans here and a...a Transgalactic Council Manager.”

*Trapped! We’ve got them trapped now.* came the voices. *Hooray for us. Thought they were so clever.*

“Hello,” called Carrie. “Listen to me. There are more than just placktoids aboard. Hello?” she shouted, wincing at the multitude of triumphant ootoon voices echoing around her mind.

Belinda watched her with a sardonic expression. Carrie walked to the bulge of ootoon in the hatchway, hoping proximity to the stuff might help her to be heard. “Please,” she bellowed, “please, you must listen to me.” But all she heard in return were victory cries. “Oh, it’s impossible,” she muttered, and thumbed the translator off.

“You see?” said Belinda. “Utterly pointless. The creature’s hardly sentient. You’d get more sense from a marshmallow.”

“One moment,” said Gavin. “I will attempt a conversation.” He twisted his head to its horizontal position and was silent for several minutes. The three humans watched the large bug as his feelers twitched. “I have not been successful in communicating with the ootoon,” he finally said, “I have informed it that it will be breaching Transgalactic Code 538F if any harm comes to us through its action or inaction, but it gives no coherent response. Nevertheless, I will continue the attempt.”

“How come you don’t have to speak to it out loud like I do?” asked Carrie.

“Humans are only partially telepathic,” said Gavin.

“Oh.” Carrie leaned against a stack of black boxes. “well, maybe if we wait it’ll calm down enough to listen. Is there anything else we can do while we’re here?”

“We do not have an endless amount of time,” said Gavin. “The ootoon can clog and prevent from working whatever it chooses. It can become as liquid as water and solidify at will. It has no doubt accessed every duct and port and jammed the engines, weapons, everything. Without running engines the ship cannot maintain orbit. Neither can it remain warm, though the ootoon coating provides a



measure of insulation. Of course, as the spaceship falls, friction with the atmosphere will generate heat but at sufficient temperatures as to be incompatible with life. To put it simply, we will freeze to death, roast to death or die upon impact with the planet surface. Now, please excuse me while I seek to gain the ootoon's attention."

Dave eyed the yellow bulge in the floor. "It doesn't sound as nice as you seem to think it is, Carrie. I'm glad it didn't think there was anything in here worth jamming."

"Yet," said Belinda.

"Well, you're all glass-half-empty types, aren't you?" said Carrie. "I'm telling you the ootoon is good at heart."

"Did you hear what Gavin said?" asked Belinda.

"It's been provoked by something. I'm sure of it. And we're still okay, aren't we? I bet there aren't any recorded instances of the ootoon actually harming anything."

"It's difficult to imagine what else has happened to the missing placktoids," said Belinda.

"Look, I admit I'm new at this job, and I might not have made much of a success of it so far, but aren't we supposed to maintain some sort of objectivity? You know, look at the evidence before we jump to conclusions?"

Belinda stood. "Are you trying to tell me how to do my job? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Carrie also levered herself upright. "Well, let's face it, you didn't even try to talk to the ootoon before you called the placktoids—"

"And what would be the point of that, exactly? As I correctly assumed, it's impossible to—"

"For goodness sake, you two," said Dave. "Just stop it, won't you? We might all be about to die, and I'd rather not go to my death trying to break up another fight."

Carrie and Belinda glared at each other, but after a time Carrie relaxed and leaned once more on the stack of boxes. She turned and looked at them curiously. "I wonder what's in these?"

"Probably raw materials to make new placktoids," said Belinda, "ready to ship home. The placktoids are mining the planet for ores."

"We didn't see any mines," said Dave.

"There are more islands than the one you were on."

"Oh," said Carrie. She rested an elbow on a box. "So, what is it you do exactly? Apart from this, I mean."

"On Earth? I'm a banker."

"That figures."

"Carrie," said Dave.

"All right, all right," she said. "So, how long have you been working for the Transgalactic Council?"

The woman shrugged. "A couple of years. It's been fairly straightforward up until now. I go to a conflict zone, establish the history, facilitate negotiations between the sides. They usually come to a resolution in time, providing they're reasonably advanced—unlike the ootoon. Job done."

"And why do you do it? I mean, it's interesting and all that, but what's in it for you? Seems like a risky profession."

"Most assignments are more clear-cut than this, and I like to travel, meet new species. There's an index-linked pension at the end of it and you can retire on the planet of your choice after ten Earth years' service."

Carrie's eyebrows rose. "Really? Those are quite some perks."

"Yes, they are. My background's finance, and believe me, Earth economies aren't stable. And what with all the environmental destruction..."

Belinda continued to speak but Carrie wasn't listening. Her eyes glazed over as she considered life as a space detective, or liaison officer, or whatever the proper job title was. Travelling between the stars, visiting new planets, meeting aliens of every kind and shape. Who knew what wonders the universe might hold? And finally settling down on the perfect world, never having to work again. She grinned. "Right," she said, cutting through Belinda's monologue, "I know I got off to a bad start, but this sounds like my dream job. You know," she turned to Dave, "I used to think I was a failure because I was always getting fired. Now I see it wasn't because there was something wrong with me, I just wasn't cut out for jobs I was doing. I wasn't the right person for them. But this, I can make a go of it, I know I can. Or at least I'm going to give it a damn good try." She stumped off towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" called Dave.

"I'm going to talk to the placktoids. The ootoon isn't evil. I know it. I'm going to get to the bottom of this conflict if it kills me."

"I can't wait to see this," said Belinda.

"The ootoon continues to fail to respond to my communications," said Gavin. His head returned to vertical. "Where is Carrie going?"

"I think she plans on opening that door so she can talk to the placktoid commander," said Dave.

"Given that the ootoon is not responding, I believe that is an appropriate course of action. Indeed, it is paramount." The insect crawled to join Carrie at the door, trailed by Belinda and Dave.

Carrie was examining the door.

Belinda snickered. "All the systems are off, remember? The ootoon has jammed them all."

Carrie rubbed her chin. "The ship's general systems may be off.

That doesn't mean the local ones are. That emergency lighting, for instance. It must be locally powered or on a backup grid. I bet there's some way we can open this. Gavin, do you know how these doors work?"

"As with most placktoid technology, the mechanism is comparatively simple. They're magnetic."

"Magnetism to open or close them?"

"The doors are nearly always open. A magnetic field is activated to hold them closed."

"An emergency system," said Carrie. "Thanks, Gavin. How come you know that?"

Ten pairs of legs shuffled to the right. "In my previous position I was a safety inspector for the Transgalactic Council Fleet. The placktoids contributed several ships."

"Why did you leave?"

"I did not leave as such, I was forced to resign. I would rather not say why."

"It's okay. Don't worry, you aren't going to get fired again. We're going to get this job done. I won't let you down, I promise. So, emergency power is holding the door closed?"

"Yes, it's a safety mechanism."

"You." Carrie turned to Belinda. "You must have something in that bag that neutralises magnetic fields."

Belinda's expression was pinched. "No, I haven't."

"Carrie is correct. I believe you have," said Gavin. "The magnetic field neutraliser. It's about this long—" he held up two claws six inches apart—"and it—"

"Oh, *that* magnetic field neutraliser." Belinda narrowed her eyes. She rummaged in her bag, retrieved the instrument and slapped it into Carrie's outstretched palm.

"How do I—"

"Press the switch at the end," snapped Belinda.

Carrie pressed the switch. With a quiet whoosh, the door slid open. Carrie strode through and turned left.

"Right," said Dave. "The shredder's to the right, Carrie."

She about-faced and walked past the others. Dave caught her up.

"What are you going to say to the shredder?" he asked in an undertone.

"I don't know yet."

"You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?"

"Kind of."

## Chapter Nineteen – Back to the Shredder

CARRIE AND DAVE WALKED silently for a while, Gavin and Belinda following a short distance behind.

Carrie said, “It’s odd, don’t you think? Why didn’t the placktoids take us with them when they left the entrance bay? I mean, they knew we were there. Gavin’s a manager in the Transgalactic Council, and Belinda and I have some kind of status, too. Why did they leave us alone like that? Shouldn’t they have made sure we got out before they closed the door?”

Dave nodded. “Something else is funny, too. Ever since we left that place, we haven’t seen a single placktoid.”

They were retracing the route the paperclip had taken on their way to their first audience with the shredder. The corridors were deserted, the doors they passed were closed, and all was quiet. The deep red emergency light gave the ship an eerie, almost subterranean appearance. Their steps and Gavin’s scrabbling tread echoed from the metal floors.

Carrie turned to her companions behind. “Gavin, why does a placktoid spaceship need lighting?”

Her insectoid manager stopped a moment to rub his hindmost legs together, making a thrumming sound. Dave peered over his shoulder at the bug, and increased his pace.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Carrie as they resumed walking.

“No, not at all,” said Gavin. “I was expressing approval. I believe the human equivalent would be clapping. I was pleased because I think that may be the first intelligent question I have heard you ask.”

Belinda smirked.

“Thanks,” said Carrie. “I think.”

“You have clearly noted a discrepancy between the placktoids’ construction and their chosen environment. The placktoids are not biological, but mechanical. They are manufactured. In fact, they manufacture themselves. As such, they can select the sensors with which to equip themselves. There are a range of methods they could use to perceive the physical environment other than vision, or vision that depends upon certain wavelengths of light. Many of them do employ several other sensory strategies. The question why they light their spaceships has been asked before by anthropologists. As far as is understood, the best answer is that it is an entirely cultural phenomenon.”

“The placktoids have culture?”

“Of course they have culture.”

“But you just said they’re mechanical. They’re robots.”

Gavin chittered. “You must try to keep an open mind. The English word “robot” hardly expresses the widely ranging functions, intelligence and abilities of the placktoids. The species that originally devised and built them became extinct millenia ago. No one is sure why or how exactly; but since that time, the placktoids have developed a rich and diverse culture of their own.”

“And that includes light worship or something?”

“I do not believe it is worship exactly, though I am not an expert on placktoids. Their planet exists within a binary star system and is constantly bathed in sunlight. Therefore light is normal to them. As many species do, the placktoids construct spaceships that recreate some of the conditions of their home planet. It is what they’re used to; it is what makes them comfortable.”

“Comfortable?” Carrie imagined a huge stapler reclining on a chaise longue. “That’s interesting.”

“I agree. Spaceship design is a passion of mine.” Gavin fell silent. Carrie wondered if he was remembering the incident that had got him fired from his position as a spaceship inspector.

“This is it,” said Dave as they entered a large chamber. Carrie recognised the place. It was lofty and wide and characteristically bare of any instruments or decoration. Dave had brought them to the right room, but there was no sign of the shredder or any other placktoids.

“The commander must have gone somewhere to deal with the attack,” said Carrie.

“Most odd,” said Gavin.

“It must have gone that way.” She pointed to the shadowy end of the room, where a massive doorway gaped. “It wouldn’t fit the way we came. That’s strange. The big ones don’t usually move around much, do they?”

“No,” agreed Gavin.

“Did it go to the ship’s command centre?” asked Dave.

“It is the ship’s command centre,” said Gavin. “Placktoids are not humans. They do not press buttons or consult screens. All communications between them and their instruments are electronic. They only emit sounds when talking with biological species that perceive sound waves.” He walked sideways to the end of the room, disappearing into the dark red shadows.

“Is he going somewhere?” Dave asked Belinda.

“He’s thinking,” she replied.

Gavin returned, walking sideways again. “This situation is both inexplicable and unfortunate. We have no option but to search the ship and find the placktoids. We must facilitate communications between them and the ootoon and seek a resolution to this crisis. It is

the only means to our survival.”

“Good luck with that,” said Belinda. “The ootoon refuses to communicate and now it has no reason to. As far as it’s concerned, it’s won, for the time being, anyway.”

“Nevertheless, we must try,” said Gavin. “This way.”

The three humans trailed after Gavin as he set off across the room once more, heading for the cavernous exit. Carrie shivered and rubbed her arms. The temperature was dropping. She wondered where the placktoids could be hiding, if that was what they were doing. When she and Dave had been aboard the ship before, the place had seemed to be filled with them. How could they all just disappear?

Belinda fell into step next to Carrie. “So, I’ve told you a bit about my background. How about you?”

“I just started a new job, actually, as a call centre supervisor.”

“Really? How interesting.”

Carrie thought there was a touch of sarcasm in Belinda’s tone. She stiffened.

“And what did you do before that?”

Carrie listed her various minor, menial and dead end jobs as she looked up at the statuesque beauty’s profile. Her voice became quieter and quieter as she went on. As she finished, Belinda turned to her with a condescending smile.

“Forgive me for saying this, but you know what you said before about being determined to succeed in this job, that didn’t really make a lot of sense. If we get out of this alive, you should resign.”

“What? Why?”

“Can’t you see for yourself? It’s difficult and dangerous, and, to be frank, you don’t seem to know what you’re doing. I’m not sure how you managed to get hired. You need years of experience of talking with people in positions of power to do this job. Negotiating skills, sound judgement, diplomacy.” She shook her head. “I hardly think walking dogs or dressing up to deliver birthday telegrams is what the Transgalactic Council is looking for.”

Carrie flushed and her nostrils flared. She fumed for a few silent moments as Belinda smiled smugly, then the realisation hit her. “Oh, I get it. You’re feeling bad because I beat you in that fight and found a way out of the entrance bay. Thought you’d take me down a notch or two.”

“That’s nothing to do with it,” Belinda snapped. “You were lucky, that’s all.”

“Hah.” Carrie smiled.

“Oh, stop it, you two,” said Dave.

“Hey, she started it,” said Carrie.

“And you took the bait,” said Dave.

Gavin stopped in front of a door. “We must enter each room in a systemic manner. We will start here and work our way through the spaceship as quickly as we can. When we find the placktoids we must convince them to communicate with the ootoon. We do not have much time before the ship drops out of orbit.”

## Chapter Twenty – Surprise Discovery

CARRIE OPENED EACH door with the magnetic field neutraliser. There were rooms full of metals, plastics, unrecognisable materials and what might have been tools, and rooms stocked with the matte black boxes they had seen in the entrance bay, but no placktoids.

One room they entered contained a pair of large doors set into the floor. Carrie tried using the neutraliser on them but they remained closed. Each door had a handle, and Carrie pulled on one. The door lifted a fraction. She peeked through the gap, but it was too dark to see inside.

“What’s in there, do you think, Gavin?”

The creature’s feelers twitched. “I do not recall this feature in placktoid ship design. As with the holding cell in which you and your companion were confined, it must have been added after manufacture.”

“Could the placktoids be down there?”

“Not all of them,” said Dave, “half of them wouldn’t fit through that hole. Unless there’s another entrance somewhere.”

“It is unlikely there are any placktoids in an unlit area,” said Gavin. “It is odd that magnetism is not being used to holding the doors closed. The fact implies they are not normally left open in the same way as the others on the ship. Perhaps it is a safety feature.”

“I can’t lift them. They’re too heavy,” said Carrie.

“There must have been an opening mechanism that is now disabled. And placktoids are generally much stronger than humans,” said Gavin.

“What do we do, then?” asked Dave.

“Let us search the rest of this section,” said Gavin. “Perhaps placktoids are close by.”

The group returned to the corridor of closed doors.

“Belinda, what’s the story behind all this?” asked Dave as they continued their search. “How come you’re doing this job? You said before you’re a banker. How did you find out about life on other planets?”

“You mean you don’t know about what goes on in the galaxy?” said Belinda. She nodded. “It all makes sense now. You’re strays.”

“Do you have to be so rude?” said Carrie.

“Ugh, not in that sense, though...” She looked down her nose at Carrie, who glared at her. “I mean you strayed from Earth. Look, there’s a small number of humans who are aware of extraterrestrial life, and a large number who haven’t a clue. You belong to the latter, don’t you?”



Carrie pinched her lips together.

“Well, I certainly had no idea about any of this until I got sucked under Carrie’s sink,” said Dave.

“It isn’t as big a secret as you might imagine,” said Belinda. “The Transgalactic Council made contact with world leaders decades ago, but until we develop intragalactic travel, Earth is barred from joining the Unity.”

Dave was open-mouthed. “Why haven’t they told us?”

“I’m not sure why the leaders keep quiet about it. Maybe they’re worried it will make them unpopular if people know the galaxy is teeming with life but they can’t go there or have anything to do with it. And the opposing political parties can’t come up with the goods either, so they also don’t say anything.”

“But surely they should pour all their resources into developing space travel?” said Dave.

Belinda shrugged. “Budgets have to be accounted for. But I think the scientists are getting close, finally.”

Carrie’s curiosity overcame her reluctance to speak to Belinda. “So how did you get this job?”

“The Council likes to recruit humans as Liaison Officers because we have no history of conflicts or alliances with other species. Without any baggage, we’re trusted to be neutral. I say ‘we’ but in fact I’m half dandrobian.” She smiled smugly.

“You’re...?”

“Can’t you tell?” Belinda drew herself up to her full height. Tossing her tawny mane over her shoulder, she turned her head from side to side. She dropped her pose. “Hmpf, of course you can’t. You’ve never met a dandrobian have you?”

“If I might interrupt?” said Gavin. They had come to the end of the section. “I suggest we check what is behind the non-magnetised doors we found earlier before we move on. What is the saying in English? We should leave no stone unturned. There is a small possibility there may be a placktoid in there who can inform us where the rest have gone.”

They returned to the room, and Belinda took hold of one of the door handles.

“Hold on,” said Dave, “maybe there’s a reason those doors are closed.”

“I cannot imagine why,” said Gavin. “The placktoids have nothing to fear aboard their own ship.”

Belinda grunted, and the door lifted an inch. “Damn, this is heavy.”

Dave lent a hand, and the door began to slowly open. In the area beneath, all was dark. The meagre deep red emergency lighting didn’t

penetrate. When the door was halfway open, Gavin said, "There is something in there. I can hear movement."

Dave and Belinda heaved the door up until it was past vertical, then stepped back to let it fall open. Dave shook his head as the door clanged to the floor.

"I can hear something, too," said Carrie. There was a metallic rustling and swishing. It reminded her of something but she couldn't think what. Dave went to the room entrance, where he lingered. The other three looked into the shadowy interior.

"I know," exclaimed Belinda. She rummaged in her bag.

"Have you got some kind of detection instrument?" asked Carrie.

"Sort of." Belinda pulled a long, cylindrical object from the bag, and flipped a switch. A beam of light shone out. "It's called a torch." She angled the light into the hole. "Well, I never."

Carrie and Gavin peered in.

"Most odd," said Gavin. In the circle of light from the torch, hundreds of small paperclips shifted and glinted. They were five or six times the size of their inanimate Earth cousins.

"Dave," called Carrie, straightening up, "you were right. There *are* baby paperclips." She looked again into the hole in floor. "Woah." The paperclips were rising and floating towards them along the beam of light. "Errmmm..." She took a step back. The lead paperclip had reached the edge of the hole, and continued to rise. As it drew level with her eyes, it changed direction and zoomed into her face, hitting her between the eyes. "Ow," she cried, "they're attacking." More paperclips were gliding out of the hole. Another one hit her, and another.

Carrie was forced to close her eyes and cover her face. She gave out little squeaks as the placktoid onslaught continued against her hands and the rest of her body.

## Chapter Twenty-One – Paperclip Battle

BELINDA WAS YOWLING, and Carrie could hear the pings of placktoids bouncing off Gavin's exoskeleton.

"Most odd. Most odd," he said.

Carrie spun around, disorienting herself. She didn't dare move too far in case she fell into the pit, nor peek between her fingers, but she remembered Dave had been standing by the exit. "Dave, where are you?"

"Over here."

Her arms spread in front of her, Carrie stepped hesitantly towards her friend's voice, cringing at the paperclip strikes, which felt like bee stings. "Open the door."

"I can't. I haven't got the neutraliser."

"Ow." A placktoid had struck just below her nose. The strength of their impact seemed to be increasing. But Dave wasn't making a sound. "Aren't they attacking you?"

"No, they're attacking Belinda and Gavin, mostly. Get over here. Maybe they'll leave you alone."

The frequency of hits did seem to diminish as Carrie neared Dave. He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him. The jabs from the mechanical aliens stopped. She opened her eyes. She was at the closed door. Back at the open hatchway, Gavin was looking as bemused as an insect can while the paperclips pinged off his shell. Belinda was swinging the torch round in a futile attempt to ward off the attack.

Carrie swallowed, hard, and called, "Belinda, come over to the door. It looks like they're staying in that area. You'll be safe here. Gavin, we have to get out."

Belinda began to shuffle towards Carrie and Dave, voicing regular expressions of pain as the paperclips hit her around her face and head and along her outstretched arms. Gavin didn't move, but instead gazed into the hatch from which the aliens were swarming.

"Hey, I think they're growing," shouted Dave.

"That is impossible," said Gavin.

Carrie peered at the swirling silver mass around the hole in the floor and the separate mass that encircled Belinda as she edged closer. It was difficult to tell, but she suspected Dave was right.

Belinda had crossed more than half the distance to the exit, but as she drew nearer the aliens followed. She wasn't leaving them behind.

"Ow," said Carrie as a paperclip flew into her neck. "Oh no, they're coming over here with her. Go back, Belinda, go back."

"No, I'm getting away from these things."

"You aren't getting away. They're following you."

Gavin, despite standing right next to the open hatch, was no longer being hit. He watched the clouds of placktoids zooming around Belinda.

“Ow,” shouted Carrie as another alien hit her. “Stop. Go away.” But it was too late. Belinda and her attackers had come too close.

“Ouch,” cried Dave. He dashed to the opposite side of the room, which was empty for the moment. Carrie ran to join him.

“Am I nearly there? Where are you?” called Belinda. “Where’s the door? Ow. Ouch.”

“It’s you they’re after,” called Carrie. “They aren’t attacking anyone else. Just you.”

“Oh no! Ouch. What am I going to do? Help. Help me.”

“Gavin, what can we do?” called Dave.

“Most perplexing,” he said.

Belinda was performing a mad dance as she waved the torch around her head. She set off in a different direction across the room, but wherever she went the aliens followed. Carrie and Dave kept carefully out of her way.

Belinda’s erratic, desperate movements generated in Carrie a tiny twinge of sympathy. “Maybe we can open the door, push her into the corridor, and close the door quickly behind us.”

“Look at her,” said Dave. “She’s swarming with them. They’ll follow her and the rest of us out.”

Carrie rubbed her face, where most of the placktoids had hit. The idea of being pursued around the spaceship by the small, vicious creatures didn’t appeal. She watched Belinda as she gyrated. Why were they attacking only her? What was different about her? What had she said about herself? A crease formed between Carrie’s eyes. *That was it, she thought, she said she was half-dandrobian.*

“Oh, please—ow—someone help me,” called Belinda.

“Gavin, what’s a dandrobian?” asked Carrie.

“The predominant sentient species of the planet Dandrobia.”

Carrie sighed. “Is there something about them that planktoids hate?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I do not believe the two species come into regular contact, in fact.”

“Can’t someone do something?” cried Belinda. “Any of you? Ouch. Ow.”

It had to be something else. Were they attacking her because she was tall? No, Dave was tall, too. Because she was shouting? No, Carrie had also shouted. What did she have that no one else in the room had? Carrie watched the aliens sweeping through the light from the torch. They reminded her of something. She strained to remember. The image came to her. The paperclips were behaving like moths

around a flame. Though they circled, they always returned to the light. She remembered the tiny placktoids rising up along the torch's beam from the hole in the floor. She shouted, "The torch. Turn off the torch."

"What? Why?"

"They're attracted to the light. Turn it off."

Belinda fumbled for the switch, her eyes still closed. As the beam disappeared, the aliens' energy dissipated. Their flying slowed until they drifted down like metallic snowflakes to the floor, where they lay moving feebly.

Putting the torch in her bag, Belinda smoothed her hair. Her face and hands were a mass of pink lines and shallow scratches. Two placktoids were caught in her tawny locks. She disentangled them and threw them down.

"Well," she said, "thank goodness that's over. Horrid things."

Carrie looked at Dave, an eyebrow raised. "You're welcome."

"I'm sorry?" said Belinda.

"I said, you're welcome. My saving you from the paperclips was no problem."

"Oh, that." Belinda waved a hand. "I was just thinking the same thing. About how the paper—I mean, placktoids—must be following the light from the torch."

Carrie's mouth fell open. She turned to Dave, who shrugged.

"Very, very strange," said Gavin. His head was bent close to the small mechanical aliens on the floor.

Carrie could not decide who, between Belinda and Gavin, she wanted to hit most. "Gavin, I swear, you say that one more time—"

"Baby placktoids," said Gavin.

"Yes, we did notice," said Carrie.

"Not possible."

"Erm..." Carrie gestured to the small placktoids shifting slowly around them.

"Placktoids are mechanical. They build new members of their species. They have no juvenile stage."

"Maybe they're just small ones," said Dave.

"I have never seen a placktoid even approaching this diminutive size," said Gavin, "nor can I think what possible use such a small creature might have in their society. Furthermore, I believe you were correct. Look there."

Carrie studied the aliens Gavin indicated. They seemed identical except for one thing. "They're different sizes."

"They grew while they were attacking us," said Gavin. "Placktoids do not grow. And see here." Two neatly severed paperclip halves were on the floor. A thin blue liquid dribbled from their ends.

“Unfortunately a paperclip flew into my inner mandibles during the attack and cut itself in two.”

“What’s that blue stuff? Antifreeze or something?” asked Carrie.

“I believe it to be a form of blood. An unfortunate loss of life, but an accident.”

“They can bleed?” asked Dave.

“Again, no, placktoids do not bleed. But this one and presumably all its companions do. It appears the placktoids are developing biological parts and have instigated an intensive breeding programme. This is a most serious matter. Habitable planets are few and far between in the galaxy. The population growth of every species must be sustainable. The placktoids were granted permission to settle on the ootoon planet because the land area is unused, but their numbers cannot grow indefinitely. I cannot imagine why they would want to develop these excessive breeding methods.”

“But they still need materials to grow,” said Belinda. “They must pay for those, or acquire them somehow.”

“No, indeed,” said Gavin. “These were growing with the aid of one primary resource.”

“Light,” said Carrie.

Gavin lifted his back legs and rubbed them together. “Perhaps carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, too, in a manner similar to many plant species. We must search further, and try to find out not only where the placktoids are, but what they are doing. A further concern of mine is that these juvenile placktoids are aggressive.”

The spaceship seemed to drop from beneath Carrie’s feet. Her stomach lurched. “What was that?”

“The spaceship’s course has become unstable. I believe we may soon begin our descent to the planet,” said Gavin.

“Here’s hoping for a soft landing,” said Dave.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Where Have All the Placktoids Gone?

DEPRIVED OF THE STRONG beam of light from the torch, the baby aliens had little energy to resist as Carrie, Dave and Belinda quickly scooped them into the hole in the floor. Belinda and Dave hefted the door over and it slammed shut with a satisfying clang. Carrie thought of the paperclips rustling in the dark, and shivered.

The four stepped up the pace of their search, hastily glancing through each door Carrie opened before running to the next one. The ship was large and soon the humans were sweating and panting, though Gavin seemed to cover the ground with ease.

But wherever they looked, there was not a sign of the placktoids.

“Maybe they left in a matter transporter,” said Carrie, as they rounded a corner and found themselves in the corridor leading to the entrance bay.

“That might be a possibility, if such a thing existed,” said Gavin. “However, as far as I am aware, this instrument has not yet been invented, therefore—”

Carrie held up her hand, palm outward. “I get it. There are no matter transporters.”

“No,” replied Gavin. “No. If the placktoids had invented a method for transporting matter, they could name any price for it. Sadly, I believe the truth to be far more alarming. You are all fatigued. Please rest for a moment.”

They had returned to the entrance bay. Inside the large area stacked with black boxes, the mound of ootoon still protruded through the hatchway.

“We have searched most of the ship,” said Gavin, as they entered. “Its layout has been altered from the original design but there is, as far as I am aware, no section we have not explored that is large enough to contain the ship’s crew. I think we can safely conclude they are not on board. Yet, as we found, the shuttle ships are in their docks, and we saw none depart while the ship was being attacked. The placktoids did not fly down to the planet surface.”

“So where have they gone?” asked Dave.

“There is only one method by which the placktoids could leave, and if my deduction is correct, when it is considered along with evidence of the development of biological reproduction and growth, it is most damning.” Gavin lowered his abdomen to the ground.

“What is your deduction, then?” asked Carrie.

The insect’s inner jaws retracted and protruded twice before he said, “I believe the placktoids created a gateway.”

“Oh,” said Carrie, “you mean the spiral of green mist? Seems sensible to me, in the circumstances. I mean, that’s how we tried to leave, right? Before the ootoon surrounded the ship. It isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Of course it’s bad,” said Belinda. “Why do you think Earth isn’t overrun with aliens? It isn’t just anyone who can create gateways. The Transgalactic Council must grant permission, which it very rarely does.”

“If there were free passage to any planet via gateways,” said Gavin, “it would be extremely disruptive. Millions might suddenly flock to other worlds, or criminals might turn up, steal or murder, and disappear again. There are endless appalling scenarios that could occur. Gateway technology is highly confidential and its usage limited to essential needs only.”

“And now the placktoids have it,” said Carrie.

“Apparently so. They are acting illegally and subversively. If word of this gets back to the Transgalactic Council, they will be disbarred from all treaty agreements and subject to the strictest sanctions. Placktoid colonies on other worlds will be immediately arrested and confined indefinitely. The placktoids know this of course. Employing gateway technology is tantamount to declaring war on the entire galaxy.”

The spaceship lurched, and Carrie grabbed the wall for support. “But if word doesn’t get back to the Transgalactic Council, what then?”

“Then the placktoids are free to travel wherever they want and to increase their numbers at an astronomical rate, raising an army of their kind. We must leave this ship and alert the Transgalactic Council.”

“Then we have to persuade the ootoon to let us go,” said Dave.

“We’ll never do it,” said Belinda. “There’s no communicating with that thing. It’s barely intelligent.”

Carrie tutted. She went to the bulge of ootoon, took out her translator and switched it on. A babble of voices filled her mind. *Ruin the placktoids. Catch them, crush them. More hostages. They’ll never hurt us now. Wheeee, we’re flying. I miss home. The placktoids attacked us. Revenge! Let’s see how they like it.* Carrie turned off the translator. Maybe Belinda was partially right. The ootoon surrounding the ship seemed impossible to communicate with, though it wasn’t unintelligent. There were just too many personalities within it who were focused on harming the placktoids. A few might be listening, but not enough to influence the majority.

Gavin, Dave and Belinda had joined her.

“I told you,” said Belinda. “It’s a complete waste of time. We’re



doomed.”

Carrie strode to the far end of the bay and found a pile of boxes to slump down behind. She could not stand being around Belinda a moment longer. *Smug, doom-mongering, arrogant, b—*

“How are you doing?”

Dave had come up behind her.

“That woman,” she exclaimed.

He grimaced and sat down beside her. “I have to admit she’s been getting to me, too.”

“What are we going to do? We’ve got to get out of here. I have to get back to Toodles and Rogue. I’m new in the area. I don’t know anyone there, and no one knows me or that I’ve got pets. If I don’t get back who knows what’ll happen to them.”

Dave rested his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, there are a few people who might miss me.” He smiled. “I had no idea your housewarming party would turn out quite like this.”

Carrie hung her head. “I’m sorry I got you into all this.”

“Don’t apologise. It’s been kinda fun, in a strange way.”

“You’re too nice, you know? Anyway, in case we don’t manage to find a way out of this, I wanted to say, it’s been good to know you. We only met yesterday, though it feels like a lifetime ago, but you’ve been a great friend.”

“I’m glad I met you as well, Carrie.”

“And I forgive you for stealing from me.”

“I keep telling you, I have a condition.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carrie stood. “Maybe we should move away from these boxes. The way the ship keeps lurching, we stand a good chance of one of them falling on us.”

Dave also got to his feet. “I wonder what’s in them?”

“I wondered that, too. Probably more baby paperclips, ready for shipping to another planet.”

“But if they can use gateways, the placktoids don’t need to ship anything.”

Carrie frowned. “That’s right. What can these be for, then? They must be containers for something.”

“Let’s have a look.” He peered at the nearest box. “Maybe we can get one open.”

“Are you sure we should try? What if a load of...I don’t know...alien pens come flying out and start poking us in the eyes?”

“But they need light for energy. It’s pretty dark in here.”

Carrie nodded and ran her fingers along the edges of the box Dave was examining. It was as high as her chest and about the same width. Aside from two handles on its lid, the box seemed smooth and featureless. There didn’t seem to be a way to open it. But then Carrie

had an idea. If the placktoids used magnetism to hold doors closed, might they not do the same with their containers? She pulled out the magnetic field neutraliser and ran it along the nearest edge. As the instrument passed over it, there was a small click. Dave's eyebrows lifted.

Looking closely at the matte black edge, Carrie could make out a fine crack. She pushed her fingernails into it, forcing it wider. As the side came free Dave leapt back. It banged to floor exactly where he had been standing, yellow liquid gushing out and over his shoes and trousers.

"Not again," he groaned.

It was ootoon. The box had been full to the brim with ootoon.

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Ootoon Everywhere

GAVIN SCRABBLED OVER on his spiderlike legs. The box they had opened was empty except for a thin layer of ootoon the bottom. The rest of the contents were spread out over the floor in a large puddle.

“Whoops,” said Carrie.

“Is that an expression of regret?” asked Gavin. “There is no need to apologise. You have made an interesting discovery. We must examine the other boxes. I do not know why the idea did not occur to me.”

They opened four boxes, each in different areas of the entrance bay. All were filled with ootoon. The liquid didn’t dry up under the dim red emergency lighting as it had in the strong sunlight on the planet surface.

“Perhaps this will help us convince the ootoon to release its hold on the ship,” said Gavin.

“I don’t see how,” said Belinda. “It’s hardly going to make the ootoon less belligerent to the placktoids if it knows they’ve been removing it from the planet and keeping it here.”

“It must already know it, or parts of it do. That’s why it’s attacking,” said Carrie. “When enough of the ootoon knows or decides something, it acts. We’re surrounded by the ootoon that knows exactly what the placktoids have been doing, and there was enough of it to break away from the planet and attack the ship.”

Carrie smacked her forehead. “Of course. I was wrong. The ootoon is responsible for the missing placktoids. It captured them while they were siphoning it up. Then the placktoids started bombing it in retaliation and to try to beat it into submission. When the Transgalactic Council inspected the settlement process, the placktoids knew the ootoon would be a poor witness for what had been happening to it. Talking to the ootoon is like talking to individuals of an angry mob. Each has a different story to tell of what happened where, when and to whom. All most of them know is that something bad happened to some of them and they’re angry about it.”

“Yes, yes. I see we may have been interpreting this conflict incorrectly,” said Gavin. “The Transgalactic Council report was perhaps inaccurate.”

“Because the ootoon can’t communicate well,” said Carrie. “And no one ever really took the time to listen to it, all of it.”

“There have certainly been difficulties, yes, which is one reason why I dispatched you to the ootoon planet, to gather more information.”

“Hmpf.” Belinda was looking at her with a scornful smirk.

Carrie’s elated smile faded. She had acted irresponsibly and failed

the victimised ootoon. If only she had investigated the contents of the handbag and seen the briefing device. If only she had taken the job seriously, or just refused to do it when she realised what it was about. Who did she think she was? She was just a mediocre nobody who couldn't even work in a call centre.

Dave touched her shoulder and smiled.

A massive bang shot through the air. The floor shook, and they stumbled.

"What the hell was that?" said Belinda. "Did we hit something?"

"I don't think so," said Dave. "It came from over there." He gestured to a blank wall at the far end of the entrance bay. The metal wall was misshapen, though earlier it had been perfectly straight like the rest of the ship. Another huge crash sounded and the wall buckled towards them. "Whatever's coming through, I don't think it's friendly."

"I am in agreement with you," said Gavin. "I think it would be expedient to leave."

"But what if it's come to attack the ootoon?" said Carrie. "We have to protect it."

"I do not believe it is attacking the ootoon," Gavin replied. "Whatever it is, it has had ample opportunity to do that. I do believe it intends to attack—"

A third ear-splitting bang rent the air. Carrie staggered.

"—us."

At a fourth boom the wall gave way. A large, rectangular, metal object rolled into view, its wide, toothed maw glinting red. The placktoid commander.

"What the...How did we miss that?" shouted Dave, as the four ran towards the door. Gavin had been right. The shredder zoomed directly at them.

Carrie looked over her shoulder as she ran. For a large item of usually stationary office equipment, the commander was surprisingly fast. It was gaining on them, and it was heading straight for her. "Watch out," she shouted. She veered off to one side. Dave, Gavin and Belinda swerved to the other and not a moment too soon as the placktoid zoomed through the place they had just been. It began to turn, but though it was fast it maneuvered badly. It could only turn in a wide circle. As it did so, it cut a path through the stacked boxes, overturning and crushing them. Ootoon oozed over the floor.

They were forced to run in the opposite direction now that the commander was between them and the door. Gavin made it to the other end of the entrance bay first, and the others soon joined him. They stood at the wall the placktoid had driven through, as the machine completed its circle. Behind them, the secret room was dark.

“I suggest we withdraw through here,” said Gavin. “There may be an exit.” He scrambled over the remains of the wall and into the shadowy room. But there was no door. It was as if the commander had been sealed in a tomb at the departure of its crew.

A high-pitched whine told them the placktoid was bearing down on them again.

“Run,” Carrie shouted, but they needed no warning. As the alien’s caterpillar tracks carried it over the torn wall and into its former hiding place, they scattered left and right and ran down the room again, outmaneuvering the clumsy machine.

They met at the door, which was closed. Without the influence of the magnetic field neutraliser, it had slid shut behind them after they entered the entrance bay. Carrie felt for the neutraliser in her pocket, but she couldn’t find it. Dave and Belinda watched anxiously as she checked her pockets again and again. The neutraliser must have fallen out while she was running. Her eyes searched the floor.

“Where’s the neutraliser?” asked Belinda.

At the other end of the room, the shredder had completed its turn and was bearing down on them once more.

“I don’t know,” said Carrie. She scanned the mess of shattered boxes and ootoon, run through with the tracks of the shredder and footprints. Finding the neutraliser in this chaos would be hopeless.

“What? You mean you lost it?” exclaimed Belinda.

“I think it fell out of my pocket.”

“Run,” shouted Dave, as the commander drew uncomfortably close.

Dave and Carrie darted down one side of the entrance bay and Gavin and Belinda ran down the other, sheltering behind stacked boxes of ootoon. The placktoid immediately turned to follow. It swerved towards Carrie and Dave, but the maneuver cost it speed and it couldn’t reach them. In its journey it took out more boxes of ootoon, splashing the yellow liquid over itself.

The cycle repeated, this time with the shredder pursuing Belinda and Gavin. Once more their ability to turn more quickly than the alien was the means of their escape. But they could not run forever. Dave was already puffing hard, and even Carrie was starting to feel the pace. The placktoid commander seemed to have an inexhaustible power supply.

## Chapter Twenty-Four – Shredder Pursuit

CARRIE WAS BEGINNING to lose count of the number of times she had run from one end to the other of the entrance bay, pursued by a murderous alien.

Dave called, “We’ve...got to...get out...of here.” As they slammed into the wall that held the only exit, which remained closed.

“Maybe we can trick it into smashing through this wall, too,” said Carrie, panting.

“I cannot imagine how,” said Gavin. “The placktoid commander is not lacking in intelligence.”

“We need the damn neutraliser,” said Belinda, glaring at Carrie.

Dave gasped and pointed. “There it is.” The instrument had been kicked or had rolled near the corner of the room, where it lay next to a smashed box. Dave ran to get it.

“No,” cried Carrie. “There isn’t time.” The mechanical alien was nearly upon them. They needed to run again. Dave scooped up the neutraliser and turned to run back to the others. His face drained of colour. The shredder had spotted him. It had cut him off.

“Carrie,” he called, and threw the neutraliser.

She caught it as he dashed into the corner of the room and curled himself into the wall, awaiting his fate.

“No,” screamed Carrie, and closed her eyes. There was a resounding crash. Blinking back tears, she opened her eyes again. Unable to straighten its course, the commander had hit the walls at an angle, forming the longest line of a triangle, with Dave at the opposite corner.

Carrie’s heart leapt into her throat. Maybe the placktoid would reverse to align itself better, and give him a chance to escape? But it didn’t. It drove forward, its caterpillar tracks grinding the floor. The walls on either side of the corner began to buckle and break. The alien drew closer to Dave.

“Give me the neutraliser,” snapped Belinda. “We have to get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving him,” said Carrie.

“We can’t do anything for him, and if we don’t get out now, it’s us next.”

Carrie thrust the neutraliser into Belinda’s hands and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Dave,” she yelled, “jump onto it. Jump on top.” But even as she spoke she knew it was impossible. The placktoid was at least two metres tall. An Olympic champion couldn’t do it from a standing start, and there were also the rows of metal teeth to avoid.

“I’ll never make it,” came Dave’s shout. “Go, Carrie, leave me. You

don't need to see this."

"I'm not damn well leaving you, you idiot."

Belinda and Gavin were through the door. As it closed behind them, Carrie had an idea. She fished in her pockets, but as she expected, her translator had fallen out as well as the neutraliser. She thumped the door with her fist. "Belinda, give me your translator," she called. The door remained closed. "Belinda, damn you, come back here right now and give me your translator."

"I've got it." It was Dave, yelling over the grinding of the shredder's caterpillar tracks against the floor.

"What?"

"I've got her translator."

"You stole it?"

"I have a condition."

"Never mind that now. Throw it to me."

The translator came sailing over the placktoid. As it hit the floor Carrie snatched it up and turned it on. "Hey, commander," she bellowed. "Stop immediately. I am Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, and I demand you stop."

In its BBC newscaster voice the alien replied, "The Transgalactic Council is far from here, little human, and soon there will be nothing left of this ship. You and your companions will be dead. There will be no one left to report me. Run away. When I've finished with this one, I'll chase you and kill you. That will be fun."

Carrie couldn't think of a reply. The commander was right. Unless they could convince the ootoon to release its hold on the ship, they would all be dead soon. But being shredded to death was not a pleasant way to go, and she was determined that wasn't going to happen to her or her friend.

She launched herself at the mechanical alien and banged on its metal sides with her fists. The machine ground on. There was now only a narrow space between it and the corner of the room. Carrie couldn't see Dave but she imagined him cowering, awaiting his terrible fate as the grinding metal teeth drew nearer.

"Stop," she screamed and kicked the placktoid, gasping as the impact jolted her leg. "Stop, please. Please." She hit it again. There could be no room left by now for Dave. The teeth must be nearly upon him.

Dave's yell was long and loud, and cut off abruptly. Carrie covered her face. Then she noticed the silence. Not only had Dave stopped yelling, the placktoid was also making no noise. She opened her fingers a crack and peeped through. The machine was motionless, and it hadn't quite reached the corner of the room.

"D-Dave?"

“Carrie?”

“You’re alive!”

“It’s stopped, but I’m trapped. I can’t get out. I’m thinking it’s going to start up again any second now.”

Carrie scanned around. She had to get Dave out and quickly. But all there was in the entrance bay was the boxes of ootoon. The smashed and remaining intact ones had been scattered randomly around by the shredder’s progress. When the answer hit her she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before. She ran to the nearest box and pushed it as hard as she could. It was very heavy. Her efforts slid it a few inches across the floor. The stickiness of the spilled ootoon made the going even harder.

After turning so that her lower back was pressed against the box and her feet were braced against the floor, Carrie pushed again, straining with all her might. The box slid farther towards the shredder.

“Hold on, Dave,” she panted. “I’m coming.”

“Hurry up.”

Sweating and red-faced, she pushed and pushed, until finally the box was close enough. She climbed onto it, then onto the top of the placktoid. Running to the front, she saw Dave’s face peering up anxiously. He was standing in a triangle of walls and mechanical alien just large enough to hold him. She grabbed his hands and leaned back. Scrabbling up the machine’s teeth, he climbed onto the top. She took him to the box and together they climbed down.

The alien still showed no sign of movement.

“What did you do? How did you stop it?” asked Dave. “I could hear it talking, but without the translator I couldn’t understand.”

“I didn’t do anything. It wouldn’t listen to me. It said we were all going to die, it was going to have fun killing us, and no one would ever find out.”

“Then why did it stop? Has it broken down?”

Carrie scratched her head. “Shall I try and find out? Maybe it is talking, just not to us. Didn’t Gavin say they only use sound when communicating with species who can hear?”

“I suppose it’s worth trying. It might be useful to know.”

Turning on the translator, Carrie’s mind resounded with the shredder’s roar. She grimaced and handed the device to Dave, who winced as he took it. He listened a few moments before turning it off.

“All I can make out is something about the ootoon. Damn the ootoon jamming it. Once it was free it would destroy it all, etcetera.”

“The ootoon? But, how could...?”

Carrie looked around. The floor was wet with ootoon from the boxes the shredder had smashed. They were both sticky from it, and



the commander's caterpillar wheels were coated with it. "It's the ootoon, It must have been oozing into the shredder all the time when it was running over the puddles from the smashed boxes. The ootoon has jammed its tracks and engine."

There was a creak. The alien's tracks moved forward a notch, then with a roar, the placktoid started up. Carrie and Dave jumped back. The machine lurched forward and drove into the remaining space in the corner of the room, where Dave had been only minutes before. The floor shook as it crashed into the wall before the engine fell silent again.

Dave went pale. "Let's leave."

"Yes, it's still struggling against the ootoon."

"I hope the it can hold the beast. Don't want that thing roaming the ship looking for us."

After a few minutes' banging on the door, it opened. Gavin was there holding the neutraliser with Belinda beside him, looking annoyed.

"I keep telling you there's no point...oh," said Belinda when she saw them.

"I concluded from the absence of noise from the placktoid and the strikes upon the door that one or both of you were still alive," said Gavin. "I am delighted to find I was correct."

"We're pleased to see you, too," said Carrie, noticing that Belinda didn't seem to share Gavin's happiness.

"I apologise for leaving you, but in the circumstances it seemed prudent as I was unable to offer assistance, and you insisted on remaining to help in what I believed to be a hopeless situation."

"That's okay," said Carrie.

Outside the entrance bay part of the corridor had been destroyed by the placktoid commander's efforts to kill Dave. The wall had collapsed and the alien was embedded in it, locked in its silent struggle with the ootoon that was jamming its engines. Carrie explained to Gavin what seemed to have happened. Gavin blinked, a hundred translucent lids flicking over a hundred eyes. "The ootoon has clearly developed an automatic antagonistic response to the placktoids. It did not attack us when it had the opportunity."

"That's right," said Carrie. "When we first landed in it, it let us go. I mean, it was in its natural state, so we sank and everything, but it was only when I provoked it that it captured Dave."

"What I yet fail to properly understand," said Gavin, "is why the placktoids are extracting the ootoon. I can only imagine that among its many remarkable compounds and their properties there exists something that facilitates the placktoids' ability to incorporate biological systems, reproduce organically and metabolise using light."

“I hope you manage to find out one day,” said Dave, “because that would mean we survive this.”

The ship shuddered.

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Ootoon Solution

A GRINDING LURCH FROM the commander drove the four down the corridor, away from the struggling machine. They huddled in a bend, joined in silent thought about how they were going to persuade the ootoon to release the ship.

All except Belinda. She laughed grimly. “Huh, you’re all busily rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. It’s hopeless. We left orbit —”

Dave’s punch hit her right cheekbone and sent her to the floor. She sprawled, holding her cheek. “What the hell?”

“Dave,” exclaimed Carrie. Gavin chittered.

Dave rubbed his right hand. “Damn, that hurt more than I thought it would.” He shook out his hand and stretched his fingers. “First time I’ve ever hit someone, and I hope the last. But as for you,” he pointed at Belinda, “you’ve been nothing but trouble since you arrived. What have you done to help, huh? You didn’t listen to the ootoon—I mean, neither did Carrie, but at least she’s a nice person. At least she tries. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so rude, arrogant and negative. So if you won’t help, shut up and keep out of the way, and the rest of us just might save your life.” He turned to Carrie. “What’s wrong with you?”

Her eyes were filled with tears and her chin trembled. “Do you really think I’m a nice person?”

“Hey, you just tried to save me from a terrible death at the hands of a rampant item of office equipment. After these two ran away and left me to my fate—sorry, Gavin, but it’s true. Do you think I’m gonna hate you after that?”

“I know, but it’s my fault you’re—”

“Oh stop beating yourself up. We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to figure out a way to make the ootoon listen to us.”

“But it’s too late,” said Belinda.

Dave threw her an angry glance, and she clamped her lips shut.

“I keep trying to think of a way,” said Carrie, “but I can’t come up with anything. I’ve listened to the ootoon so many times now, and it’s just a mass of conflicting voices. There isn’t one representative to listen to or talk to. It’s impossible to communicate with it.”

“But you did,” said Dave.

“What? When?”

“When it had me trapped, you persuaded it to bring you to me, and later you persuaded it to let us go.”

“But, I...yes, I did, didn’t I?” Carrie frowned. How had she done that? Why had the ootoon listened to her? “I don’t know how,

though. I just talked to it, shouted at it until I got its attention. Then it did what I was asking. I don't know why."

"Perhaps you should try again?" said Gavin. "I doubt there will be any harm in the attempt, or that it will make matters any worse than our current situation."

"I think he means we've got nothing to lose," said Dave.

Carrie set her jaw and strode, translator in hand, into the entrance bay.

It was a complete mess. At the far end was the gaping hole edged with torn metal, in the right nearest corner the shredder was embedded, surrounded by crushed and collapsing walls, and the floor was strewn with broken boxes and slippery with yellow, liquid ootoon. The remaining intact boxes were scattered everywhere.

Turning the translator on, the first thing Carrie heard was the outraged roar of the shredder, still struggling to free itself from the ootoon that had infiltrated it. As she walked hurriedly away from it, the voices of the spilled ootoon became more distinct. *Where are we? What are we doing here? Where's the rest of us? Oh, thank goodness. How nice to merge with you again. Where are my friends?* Carrie guessed that, cut off from the rest of its ocean, the ootoon in the boxes had been lonely. Other voices echoed the sentiment that pervaded the ootoon entity. *Where are the placktoids? Let's get them. We hate placktoids.*

The ootoon that had been spilled was reconnecting with the rest of itself. Pools of liquid were moving sluggishly towards other pools. As soon as two made contact they flowed into each other, and the larger pool would continue searching for more ootoon.

Carrie neared the bulge of ootoon in the floor, which was joined to the mass surrounding the ship. She noticed the strong emotions of the voices and their obsession with their task. *We've got them now. They'll never escape. Down we go. Back home, we're going home! Not long now. Curse the placktoids forever. There must be hundreds on this ship. They'll never take us away again.*

A pool of spilled ootoon oozed nearer the bulge in the hatchway. It was striving to make contact. Carrie squatted and put two fingers in the edge of the puddle. She dragged her fingers across to the bulge, creating a pathway for the isolated ootoon pool to merge. Screwing her eyes shut, she listened as hard as she could.

*Who's this? Hooray, we found you. Welcome back. Where have you been? That feels so good. The placktoids took us. It's some of the ones we lost. So good to have you back. We rescued them. We'll take them home. Down with the placktoids. Yes, down with the placktoids. We won't let them take you again.*

Carrie turned off the translator. It was impossible to think with the constant cacophony of voices in her head. She circled the bulge,

studying it. The captured ootoon pool had slipped in easily and disappeared. No doubt it was mixing with the rest of itself, adding its voices to all the others in the ootoon surrounding the ship.

Carrie stopped, her last thought echoing: *Adding its voices to all the others in the ootoon surrounding the ship*. She looked around the entrance bay at the still-intact boxes of ootoon. They were cut off from each other and wouldn't be able to communicate with ootoon in other boxes, pools, or the bulge in the floor. She wasn't sure how many ootoon voices or thoughts or personalities—she'd never quite figured that out—the boxes held, but talking to only the ootoon in each box had to be easier than trying to communicate with a whole mass of the stuff.

“Get in here, you lot,” Carrie called. “I think I might have a plan.”

A scent filled the air. It was delicious. Sweet, but slightly acrid, like, like...caramelised custard. The outer edges of the ootoon were burning. Carrie realised she was sweating. The temperature in the bay was rising. There was no time to lose.

## Chapter Twenty-Six – The Final Push

“GAVIN,” SAID CARRIE, “do you speak ootoon?”

“It is one of my languages, yes.”

“Great. That means we have at least one translator and you. Dave, look for my translator. It must have fallen out of my pocket with the neutraliser when we were running. We’ve got to talk to the ootoon in each box and make it understand there are virtually no placktoids on board, but that if it crashes into the planet it’ll be killing four innocent civilians.”

“Do you really think it cares?” said Belinda.

“Yes, I do, actually. Or enough of it does, anyway, that it’ll try and do something to save us if it can. Providing we can get the message into it.”

Wrinkling her nose, Belinda said, “And how do you propose to do that?”

“We’re going to talk to each box of ootoon. Because the contents are separated by their containers from the rest of the ootoon, they’ll be much easier to communicate with. When the contained ootoon understands the message, we’ll push it to the hatchway, open the box and tip it into the bulge so that it mixes in with the ootoon surrounding the ship. We just need to add enough ootoon that understands our predicament to tip the scales. It won’t let us die if it can help it. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to help on this foolhardy task,” said Belinda. “I don’t want to spend my last moments speaking with—”

“May I suggest you begin pushing boxes towards the hatchway, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham?” said Gavin.

Belinda pursed her lips. “I suppose if you’re going to make it an order I will talk to the ootoon, then.”

“No,” replied Gavin. “I sense your attitude in this matter is somewhat half-hearted. I believe Carrie’s unauthorised companion, Dave, will be far more effective at making the ootoon understand. Please either assist him in locating the second translator or move the boxes so that they are ready for adding to the larger ootoon mass.”

Glaring, Belinda marched to the nearest intact box and began pushing, her feet slipping on the wet floor.

“Found it,” exclaimed Dave, who had been scanning around for Carrie’s translator. He picked up the dripping instrument.

Carrie, Dave and Gavin wasted no time in talking to the ootoon inside each box, but the process seemed to take forever. First they had to attract its attention, then they had to explain why it was separated

from the greater mass and where it was—most of the captured ootoon had no idea what had happened to it—and finally they had to ask it to spread the word among the ootoon outside. It had to understand the placktoids had left and there were innocent people who were going to die if the ship crashed.

The smell of caramalised custard grew stronger. Carrie's heart sank at the thought of the ootoon burning on the edges of the blob as it sped towards the planet, and also at the fact that none of this would matter to her very, very soon.

As they added more and more of the captured ootoon to the bulge, she didn't bother checking the general sentiment of the larger ootoon enclosing the ship. If her plan wasn't working there was nothing she could do about it. They were out of options and time, and if she had failed and they were about to perish, she would rather keep busy in this last futile attempt than sit and wait patiently for death to take her.

Belinda wouldn't have been able to move all the converted boxes to the hatchway by herself even if she was trying her hardest, which she wasn't. The other three joined in, pushing the heavy containers across the sticky floor at the same time as talking to their contents. Carrie realised that, despite her confidence and background, Belinda wasn't actually very bright. If she really thought the attempt was futile, why was she still following Gavin's orders?

When released, the captured ootoon flowed quickly and easily into the larger mass. *Even joyfully*, Carrie thought. It warmed her heart to see it set free.

The spaceship jerked and Carrie staggered. She wiped sweat from her eyes. As well as the exertion of pushing the boxes to the ootoon bulge warming her, the air temperature was becoming unbearably hot.

*We must have hardly any time left.* In fact, they had probably run out of time ages ago. How could the ootoon possibly lift the massive accelerating spaceship out of its plummeting descent? She expected at any moment there would be a deafening crash and everything would go black. She wondered whether there was an afterlife and what it was like. She hoped she would see Dave there, and maybe one day, though not too soon, Toodles and Rogue.

Dave caught her eye with a sad look. He seemed to have come to the same realisation as herself. They must be speeding through the atmosphere so quickly now that, even if her plan succeeded and they managed to convey to the outer ootoon that they were inside, their fate was sealed.

There was a grinding, wrenching sound. Carrie stopped pushing her box, her brow wrinkling. It wasn't the kind of sound she expected

from an impact with a planet at hundreds of kilometres per hour. The noise had come from the corner of the room, where the placktoid commander was embedded in the wall. The shredder.

With a deafening screech, it broke free and reversed a quarter of the length of the bay. *Not again.* The machine ground forward, then stopped, then jerked forward again, and stopped. The ootoon inside it was still trying its best to jam the thing but it was regaining control, moving farther forward each time. Dave, Gavin, and Belinda were watching it, too.

“Time for another game of chase,” called Dave.

Swinging a circle, the alien edged closer and closer to face them. Carrie and the others began to move to the side of the entrance bay. Avoiding the manic machine was easy enough, but Carrie was tired, so tired. Her arms and legs ached from pushing the heavy boxes, and her head ached from talking with the multi-voiced ootoon. She wasn’t sure she had the strength or the willpower to run from the commander again. Maybe Belinda was right. What was the point?

The placktoid faced them, its metal-toothed face crushed and twisted from impacts with walls and boxes of ootoon it had smashed. It looked like a massive car grille that had been through a crusher. The engine revved, louder and louder. It had freed itself from the clogging ootoon, and its sound was now clear and sharp. The caterpillar treads remained still as the engine gathered speed. When Carrie thought the engines couldn’t growl louder, and she covered her ears, the shredder shot forward like a greyhound from the starting gate.

Then came the deafening crash.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven – Mellow Yellow

YELLOW. EVERYTHING was glowing yellow, and the air was filled with a sweet scent. Carrie bobbed gently on the surface of a cool liquid. She blinked, trying to focus on the ceiling, which was an undefinable distance away. She tried to remember where she was and what had happened. This place didn't look at all like her bedroom, not any bedroom. But it was pleasant, and soft, and smelled nice. Maybe she should just drift back off to...Toodles and Rogue. She hadn't seen them for a long time. They would need food and water, and Rogue would need a walk. She forced herself awake.

Carrie sat up, sinking her face into the ceiling, which was a soft, blancmange-like substance. Before she had time to pull her head out, the ceiling lifted away and bubbles of air popped open across it. The events of the previous hours filtered into her mind: the placktoids, the ootoon, the desperate rush to save themselves. The last thing she remembered was the shredder breaking free and preparing to attack them again, and then nothing. The placktoid ship must have hit the planet, and she was in the ootoon. It had saved them. It must have flooded the entrance bay and cushioned them against the impact.

Flopping down, Carrie let out a sigh of relief. She'd been right. The ootoon had protected them. Or maybe that had been its intention all along? Maybe it had never meant to kill the placktoids? It didn't seem to her that the ootoon was a murderous species, even in revenge for wrongs committed against it.

But where were the others? Sitting up again, Carrie felt in her pockets and checked all around her for the translator, but it was gone. She couldn't ask the ootoon if the others had survived, or where they were. Or how to get out of the place.

As she stood, the bubble reacted by expanding around her. She wobbled on the jellylike floor. Before, the ootoon had transported her, but now she couldn't tell it where she wanted to go. But maybe she could use its reactive properties to move around? She took a step forward, and the bubble opened in front of her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the wall draw inward to close up the space behind. Success. She could move around at least. She desperately wanted to find the others, particularly Dave and Gavin, to check that they were okay. She even wanted to find Belinda, though that would probably be a brief visit. The ootoon had saved her, but that was no guarantee it had saved everyone. The impact of the falling spaceship on the ocean would have been massive, and even the exceptional properties of the ootoon must have struggled to respond to it.

Carrie strode on, wondering where she was. Was she still in the

entrance bay aboard the placktoid ship, or was she outside it in the ootoon ocean? Her muscles tensed. If she was in the ocean she could wander forever, alone, until she died. She didn't even know in which direction land lay. The planet was mostly ocean with only a few islands. She might be walking deeper and deeper below the surface, farther and farther from shore.

Her stomach churned. How she was going to find the others by wandering blindly through the ootoon? And when had she last eaten or drunk? Apart from a few mouthfuls of ootoon—she cringed at the memory—she'd had nothing in the hours since she had dived through the green mist beneath her kitchen sink on the heels of Dave.

A musical chittering came from behind and Carrie's heart leapt. As she turned, her bubble expanded and melded with another, containing a familiar creature. She had never been so happy to see her gigantic bug boss. "Gavin, thank goodness you're okay."

"Carrie. I see you are also unharmed. That is good."

"Do you know where the others are? Where's Dave? Is he all right?"

"I have only this moment succeeding in conveying to the ootoon my request to transport me to you. I do not yet know how the others fared, but in the light of our survival, I have every confidence the ootoon did its utmost to protect them. It appears your strategy was successful."

"Maybe, or maybe the ootoon never intended to harm the placktoids, only capture their ship and its crew."

Gavin's many eyes blinked. "You may be correct. I had not considered that. It is always wise to avoid concluding causation from correlating facts." The insect rubbed his hind legs together. "Regardless, I feel this is an appropriate time to inform you that, despite earlier mishaps, I find your performance in your first assignment to have been exemplary."

"Really?" Carrie almost—but not quite—wanted to hug his shiny bronze insectoid head. But she was forgetting her friend. "I've lost my translator, Gavin. Please talk to the ootoon and tell it to take us to Dave."

The surrounding ootoon must have been particularly tuned into the situation, because it didn't take more than a few moments of persistence from Gavin before the familiar protrusions rose from the floor, lifting them from their feet. Seated upon ootoon supports, Carrie and Gavin began to move, and the bubble walls flowed past.

When they burst into Dave's bubble, Carrie threw her arms round him. Compared to the well-groomed, stylish young man who had come to her flat what seemed an age ago, Dave was almost unrecognisable. His hair was a sticky mess that stuck out at all angles,

and his clothes were damp and smeared in yellow, but without him by her side, she would never have made it through the events of the previous hours.

"You won't believe what I've found," Dave said. "It's this way, I think." He turned and pointed. "Or over there." He pointed in a different direction. "Damn, I've forgotten. It's so hard to navigate in this stuff. I was wandering around try to find you, but I found something else instead."

"Perhaps I can assist," said Gavin. "What is it you wish us to see?"

Carrie could not believe Dave's answer.

They burst into the huge chamber a few minutes later, and there they were: placktoids. Hundreds of them, motionless, frozen by the ootoon that had infiltrated their systems. Carrie clutched Dave's arm and pointed. Grimacing, he nodded. The largest placktoid stood at the far end of the chamber. A massive rectangular object lying on its longest side. Just visible beneath a heavy coating of ootoon. The commander.

Carrie wondered how much ootoon it had taken to permanently jam its powerful engine. Though it was completely still, the sight of it brought Carrie's heart into her throat, and her muscles ached at the memory of the pursuit in the placktoid spaceship's entrance bay. "So this is where the ootoon is keeping the placktoid hostages."

"There is no doubt that the ootoon is responsible for the missing placktoids," said Gavin.

"Are they alive?" asked Carrie. A cacophony of screeching as the placktoids spotted them gave her her answer. She clasped her hands to her ears. "Let's get out of here."

Their bubble withdrew from the placktoid holding chamber, taking them with it, and the painful noise of the placktoids' squealing and booming faded.

"It's kept them down here all this time," said Carrie. "With their seized parts, they couldn't move, and the ootoon could block any communication they sent to the command ship. But even though the placktoids were siphoning up ootoon and taking it away, it didn't harm the prisoners it took. It never meant anyone any harm. It just wanted to be left alone."

Dave yawned and rubbed his eyes, and Carrie realised that she, too, was heavy with tiredness.

"So, that's that, isn't it?" she asked Gavin. "As they say on TV, case solved. We can return to Earth now, right?"

"But you must attend a debriefing at the Transgalactic Council. They will be most interested to hear what the placktoids have been doing. It is alarming and disturbing, and we must address their actions at once."

Carrie and Dave shared a glance of mutual agreement.

“Gavin,” said Carrie. “It’s been fun, kind of, but, you know, I need to see my pets. They’ll be wondering where I am. We just want to go home.”

Dave nodded.

“I see,” said Gavin. He worked his inner jaws in and out.

Carrie waited in the pregnant pause. She had never wanted to see her quirky cat or handsome dog so much. But the only way she would get to see them was if Gavin started up the green mist that opened a passage through the stars.

“In the circumstances,” he said at last, “I think that it would be acceptable for your assignment to end here. I am able to make a full report based on what you have told me. You both require rest after your exertions. I will ask the ootoon to convey us to land, where I will be able to open a gateway to Earth.

“But before I do that,” he continued, “I believe you are forgetting something, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett.”

“What’s that?”

“Your colleague, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight – Farewell Ootoon

BELINDA LOOKED EVEN worse than Dave from her immersion in the sticky ootoon. Her gorgeous mane of tawny hair was dark and flat and plastered to her head. Her fluorescent orange jumpsuit had caught and torn on the corners of the boxes of ootoon, leaving her in wet, yellow-orange rags.

Refusing to speak to Carrie or Dave, she gave Gavin monosyllabic answers to his inquiries after her health, and all the way back to land she did not say a word.

The ootoon deposited them on a beach near a placktoid settlement. The island that was new to Carrie. There was no red-leaved forest, but there were metallic roadways and buildings reminiscent of the interior of the placktoid ship. Empty black boxes lay abandoned near the shoreline, waiting to be filled with ootoon. There was no sign of any placktoids.

“It seems the placktoids have abandoned this settlement, perhaps upon discovering their ship had been captured,” said Gavin. “This is further evidence that they are illegally using gateways to travel across the galaxy. There is no other way they could have left the planet.”

“Where have they gone?” asked Dave.

“It is impossible to tell with any certainty. If the gateway was legitimate, the Transgalactic Council would have a record of their journey, but illegal gateways are, of course, unreported. Perhaps the placktoids returned to their home planet. A more prudent destination would be a planet unknown to the Council, in the eventuality their illegal operations had come to light.

“The remaining storage containers the placktoids created to transport the ootoon are all empty,” Gavin continued. “Presumably the planetside placktoids took the full containers with them.”

“Poor ootoon,” said Carrie. “What will happen to the parts of it they took?”

Gavin did not speak immediately, then he said, “I doubt the placktoids are interested in preserving living ootoon. They are generally only concerned with the constituents of things; raw materials for constructing more placktoids or items they require.”

None of the four spoke for a while. The planet’s sun was setting, casting violet tones over the undulating yellow ocean. The sky was turning a deep purple and stars were appearing. Carrie looked up at them. The patterns were unfamiliar, though she could see a concentrated band of silver she supposed must be the Milky Way.

“Where’s Earth?” she asked Gavin.

The insect chittered. “I apologise, but my knowledge of astronomy

is extremely poor. I am unaware of the location of your home planet, I confess, except to say that it is near the edge of the galaxy. This is one of the reasons it was only comparatively recently discovered.”

“Could the placktoids go there?” Carrie was remembering the shredder, and the placktoids’ hatred of humans.

“Much as I would like to reassure you that it is not possible for the placktoids to visit Earth, I am sorry to report that if they are travelling illegally by transgalactic gateway, they could go anywhere for which they possess the coordinates.”

“But if Earth is off limits until we develop long distance space travel,” said Dave, “how did the placktoids even know about office stationery?”

“The term ‘off limits’ is not an accurate description of the travel restrictions that apply to Earth,” said Gavin. “You three, for example, are all here. But the reason for the placktoids’ knowledge of Earth artifacts is quite simple. Your media is very popular throughout the galaxy. Documentaries, dramas, quizzes and—what is it you call them? Ah yes—makeover programmes. Extremely edifying.”

Carrie and Dave raised their eyebrows at each other.

Turning his head horizontal, Gavin said, “I will create a gateway to return you home now.”

Throughout this exchange Belinda had been standing at a short distance from the group and staring silently out over the ootoon ocean. At Gavin’s announcement she began rummaging in her bag. After pulling out a hairbrush she began to attempt to brush her thick, matted locks. “So, I’ll send in my report tomorrow.”

“Your report?” asked Gavin. His head returned to vertical.

“For this assignment, of course.”

“Thank you, but that will not be necessary. I will, however, require a report from you,” he said, turning to Carrie. “I have concluded that my decision to replace you with a more experienced officer was premature. As I said, your performance was laudable, despite a rather disorganised start.”

“But—?” said Belinda.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham, while I am grateful to you for stepping in at short notice and attempting to deal with this difficult case, some of your behaviour and attitudes during recent events have led me to question your fitness for this role. I do not require a report from you, but I do require a self-evaluation statement, outlining where you believe you could have behaved differently, and what you would do if you found yourself in similar circumstances in the future.”

Belinda’s mouth fell open, and she stood gaping like a fish out of water.

Carrie looked around once more at the alien planet, its rich colours and the silent, sluggish ootoon. A chill wind was rising. She rubbed her arms. “Gavin, please, can we go home now?”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine – Back to Work

CARRIE SCRAMBLED FROM beneath her kitchen sink and waited for Dave. Outside her window, it was still dark. She'd been sure it would be morning on Earth by now. They'd been away for ages. Rogue bounced into the kitchen, his tail a waggy blur, and jumped up at Carrie to lick her face. She rubbed his neck and ears and made a big fuss of him. Toodles was nowhere to be seen, reserving her affection as usual, but Carrie knew she was about somewhere, just waiting for her to come in and say hello.

Dave's head appeared under her sink, quickly followed by his arms, shoulders and the rest of his body. The green mist faded as he clambered out. "What's the time?" he asked as he got to his feet.

According to the clock on Carrie's kitchen wall, it was nearly eight o'clock. "That can't be right." She went into her bedroom to get her phone. Returning to the kitchen, she showed it to Dave. It displayed the same time as the clock, and the date showed it was still Friday. From her living room came the sounds of the Leonardo DiCaprio biopic still playing on her TV.

"No time's passed since we left?" said Dave. "The gateway sent us back in time to the moment we left as well as returned us to Earth. That's something your boss didn't mention."

"No, but it's great, isn't it? I'm shattered. All I want to do is go to bed."

Dave was looking at the objects on Carrie's table; at the things she had left behind when she had dived through the gateway after him. "You don't have a translator anymore."

"No, I lost it when we crashed into the ootoon's planet." Standing in her ordinary kitchen in an ordinary town in the U.K., hearing the sounds of traffic in the street below, the words sounded weird. She frowned. "That did all happen, right?"

Dave smiled. "Unless we both took the same hallucinogenic drug, yeah, it all happened. But, what I mean is, you won't have one for your next assignment. You'll have to ask Gavin for a replacement."

Carrie rubbed her forehead. "My next assignment? I don't know. I need to recover from this one, and think about it a bit." The prospect of visiting more planets was exciting, but the idea also made her heart race.

"I know what you mean. It's a lot scarier than it looks on TV or at the pictures, isn't it?"

"A lot."

"Best put all that stuff somewhere safe while you have a think about it, then," Dave said, gesturing to the devices supplied by the



Transgalactic Council and the fluorescent orange jumpsuit.

“Yeah, I’ll do it tomorrow. I’ve got to find whatever it is I need to use to send in my report first. Might as well do the job properly. I don’t want to disappoint Gavin. He’s a good person, or thing, or whatever, even if he does look like he walked out of an alien horror flick.”

Dave laughed nervously. “Yeah, he is. And it’s a good idea to tie up the loose ends.” He picked up a flat, black object and looked at it closely then, with apparent reluctance, he replaced it on the table. “You did a great job, Carrie.”

She beamed. “I couldn’t have done it without you. You know, I don’t care what the Transgalactic Council calls the job, I was kind of a space detective, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, you were.” Dave grinned and stretched. “Okay, I’m going to head home now. I’ll see myself out. See you at work on Monday.”

“Yeah, see you then,” she called as he left.

Dave’s words reminded Carrie she had to return to the call centre on Monday. She was relieved that she had a whole weekend to recover from her work as a space detective. A thrill of excitement passed through her. Maybe she would take on another assignment.

She also took a brief mental inventory of the items in her hallway, but there was nothing there she would mind losing to Dave’s light fingers.

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MONDAY ROLLED ROUND too soon. After a weekend of putting the finishing touches to her new flat, walking Rogue and coaxing Toodles out of various hiding places—receiving several deep scratches in the process—Carrie was at her desk in plenty of time for her nine o’clock start. Maintenance and IT Support had been busy over the weekend, because a new telephone had appeared on her desk, and when she logged on to her computer, the call centre’s network of operator terminals was displayed.

Carrie eyed the folder of complaints procedures on her desk, her heart sinking at the memory of all the customers she had put off with airy promises to fix their problems on her first day at the job. But she recalled what Dave had told her when he brought her some cake. The great long lists of questions and tick boxes were probably intended to frustrate the customers into giving up their complaints, which didn’t seem much better than what Carrie had done.

“Welcome back.” Ms. Bass was standing at Carrie’s desk. Her eyebrows seemed to have moved higher on her forehead.

“Oh...thanks?” Carrie couldn’t decide if Ms. Bass was being sarcastic.

“It’s good to see you here bright and early, Ms. Hatchett. Your positive attitude will not go unnoticed.” She leaned closer. “To be frank, our turnover rate for supervisors is rather high. But you seem to be keen to do a good job.”

Carrie winced. “I am keen to do a good job. Which is why I wanted to talk to you about this complaints procedure manual.”

The warmth drained from Ms. Bass’ expression, and her look became stony. “Is there a problem with it?” Her calcified look didn’t deter Carrie from a thorough explanation of why the manual was a bad idea and how the customers might prefer a more practical response. “Thank you for your comments. I will give them due consideration,” Ms. Bass said, and strode back to her office. She closed the door behind her.

Carrie sighed. *Oh well, small steps.*

An icon was blinking on her screen. An operator was transferring a complaint. Carrie put on her headset and clicked a button. A barrage of angry words spewed into her ears. Sighing, Carrie swivelled her chair away from her desk while she waited for the customer to take a breath. She made eye contact with Dave, who was talking into his mic. He gave her a thumbs up, and she smiled and waved.

At the first brief pause in the customer’s tirade, Carrie said, “I’m sorry to hear that, sir. Please go on, I’m listening.” Carrie paid careful attention to the customer’s explanation. She thumbed through her manual to find the relevant section, but it seemed to lead down a rabbit hole of inaction. She would have to find another way to deal with the complaint. Opening her desk drawer to find a notepad and pen, Carrie spotted a box of paperclips. She shivered.

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BUT WHEN SHE GOT HOME that night, the very first thing Carrie did was to check inside her Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer’s toolbox. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a message running across the screen of a flat, transparent device. She removed the device from the bag. *Liaison Officer Hatchett*, the message read, *please report for duty at 7.45 am Saturday June 7th according to your Earth time zone. You will attend a briefing session before embarking on your second assignment, which involves a visit to the planet Dandrobia.*

Carrie made herself some tea. She sat at her kitchen table, Rogue at her feet, his tongue lolling. Sipping from her mug, she mentally repeated the final word of the message. *Dandrobia*. She wondered

what kind of place it was, and what kind of aliens lived there.



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## Chapter One – Belligerent Bug

CARRIE HATCHETT WAS late. She was trying to find the room where she had been interviewed for her job as a Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer, and the seam of her fluorescent orange jumpsuit was working its way uncomfortably high.

She was walking alongside her colleague and friend, Dave. Dropping back a step or two, she stealthily tugged at the seam and jiggled her leg to ease the tension.

“What are you doing?” Dave had turned and was watching her.

“Nothing.” Carrie cleared her throat. “Now, where is that room?”

“I thought you’d been here before?”

“I have, but I kind of stumbled on the right place by accident. I can remember what it looks like from the outside, but I’m not sure how to get there.”

They were in a set of cream-coloured ceramic tunnels that had large oval recesses embedded in the walls, floor and ceiling. Bordering each recess was a line of symbols, some black, some luminous, some flashing. They approached a recess that crossed their path and were forced to leap over it before taking a left-hand turn. The tunnel walls emitted a soft glow.

“You know,” said Dave, “I shouldn’t have come along.”

“It’ll be fine, honestly. Anyway, I need you. I really do.”

Dave had accompanied Carrie on her previous—first—assignment, and she was sure she could not have succeeded without him. When the Transgalactic Council had contacted her about her next task, she had persuaded her friend to come with her to the briefing, though he was technically an ‘unauthorised companion’. Glancing at Dave’s profile, Carrie sighed. Dave was stunningly good-looking, but also—for her—disappointingly gay.

He shook his head. “You’ve shown you can do the job. I’m sure you can manage.” He looked nervously from side to side. “Maybe there’s some way I can go back? I could feed Toodles and Rogue for you.”

Carrie’s brow wrinkled. Dave knew as well as her that when they returned through the green mist that had conveyed them there from beneath her kitchen sink, no time would have passed. To Toodles, her sweet, affectionate cat, and Rogue, her lovable, handsome dog, it would be as though they had never left. Studying her friend’s face, Carrie saw beads of sweat, though the temperature was only pleasantly warm. She realised what the problem was. “Stop worrying. Gavin won’t hurt you, you know.”

“I know, but...” Dave’s shoulders slumped and he swallowed.

“You’ve got to admit...those eyes, and the j-j-jaws, with the extra set

inside and razor sharp teeth, and the legs...He's definitely got far too many legs. I mean, why does he need that many?"

Gavin, Carrie's manager in the Transgalactic Council, was a massive insectoid alien with ten pairs of legs, a bronze carapace and two sets of viciously sharp mandibles. At moments of high tension, his inner jaws had the unnerving habit of protruding several centimetres, and he had a poor understanding of the human need for personal space.

Rolling her eyes, Carrie said, "Gavin's lovely. You just have to get to know him."

Dave tugged at his shirt collar and grimaced.

As always, he looked effortlessly stylish. He was wearing denim jeans, brogues, and a button down shirt under a crew neck pullover. Carrie looked down at her orange jumpsuit, the uniform for her role in the Transgalactic Council. The colour was intended to help Council officers stand out in conflict zones and mark them as neutral personnel with diplomatic protection. Carrie's jumpsuit squashed her breasts to one homogeneous lump and the tight material neatly profiled her pot belly. The central seam had worked its way too high once more. She reached behind to pull it lower.

Glancing at her, Dave said, "That jumpsuit's too small for you."

"I know."

"Didn't they have a bigger size?"

"Yes, they did."

"Then why didn't you—"

"Because I'm on a diet," Carrie said between her teeth. She sighed and tilted her head. "I thought it would fit me when I lost a bit of weight, okay?"

"Okay," said Dave, raising his eyebrows.

"Wait, is this it?" The symbols alongside a recess looked familiar. One was a black circle above a triangle with two long rectangles below, like the symbol for the women's restroom. Carrie slipped her bag off her shoulder and put it down. The bag was her Transgalactic Council Officer 'toolbox' and held a translator, magnetic field neutraliser, briefing screen and other useful devices.

Carrie rubbed her palms together, then lightly rested one hand on the surface of the recess. Nothing happened. "Maybe not." She put her hands on her hips.

"Come on, Carrie," said Dave. "Don't you have any idea where this room is? We've been here for ages. We'll be wandering around forever at this rate."

She looked up and down the corridor. Dave was right. Their situation was difficult. The tunnels were endless and she did not know where they were nor how they could get back to the place where they

had entered. Not that it would do any good to retrace their steps. The green mist that transported lifeforms between worlds always disappeared within a few minutes, and only authorised Transgalactic Council staff could open the gateways. Carrie was not high enough in the Council to have the authority.

She needed to find Gavin soon because he would be wondering where she had got to. Though he was far nicer than his appearance suggested, he was still her boss and he would not be pleased about being kept waiting. "Right. Let's go this way." She set off decisively.

"That's the way we just came."

She halted mid-stride and about-faced. "Okay, this way then."

Dave rolled his eyes as he followed her. Traces of a rich, complex, spicy scent appeared in the air. As they walked on, the odour grew stronger. It seemed to be coming from the area they were approaching.

"Can you smell something?" asked Carrie.

Dave sniffed deeply as they turned a tight bend. "Yes, it's kind of musky, like a—" Before them loomed a huge, twenty-legged, razor-jawed, bronze-shelled alien. "Whoa." Stumbling back, Dave grabbed the wall to steady himself.

"Gavin! Great to see you again," said Carrie.

The head of the massive alien insect turned from vertical to horizontal, and the spicy scent grew stronger. Antennae quivered on the wedge-shaped head as its ten pairs of legs were set in motion. The bug approached Carrie, its inner jaws protruding until they were centimetres from her face.

"G-Gavin?" said Carrie, taking a step backwards.

Bobbing up and down, the creature advanced, forcing Carrie to continue her retreat. Its one hundred eyes blinked, transparent membranes flashing over their surfaces, and its antennae weaved to and fro.

"Carrie, are you sure...?" asked Dave as they retreated around the bend in the corridor. He reached out and clutched her arm. "Are you sure Gavin's okay?"

"Errm, now that you come to mention it..."

The scent became a reek. Carrie covered her mouth and nose as she gagged. The alien increased its pace and so did Carrie and Dave, walking in reverse so quickly they were nearly running. As the creature's inner jaws flashed out, Dave cracked. He turned and sped off down the tunnel. Carrie was not slow to follow, wondering what was wrong with her boss as she ran. *Why doesn't he say something? His English is great.*

The seams of Carrie's jumpsuit tugged painfully as she ran, and she cursed her idiocy in choosing a size that was too small. On the floor



ahead was her Transgalactic Officer's toolbox. She had left it behind after trying to open the recess, and her friend was heading straight for it.

"Dave—" she called, too late. In his blind panic, he didn't see the bag. He tripped over it, landing sprawling on the floor. Carrie stopped to help him. As she tugged on his arm to pull him to his feet, the alien caught up, its massive form overshadowing them.

Dave's muscles relaxed under Carrie's grip. "Oh, okay," he said. Unfastening Carrie's fingers from his arm, he turned to her. "It's all right." His foot was caught on the handle of her handbag. He disentangled it and fished inside the bag. "Here," he said, handing her the translator, "I think you need this."

## Chapter Two – Paradise Revealed

“WHAT IS THE MEANING of this behaviour?” A voice resounded in Carrie’s mind. She had taken the translator from Dave and was gripping it tightly, her other arm linked with her friend’s to provide the contact that meant he, too, would hear the translator’s broadcast. The two humans sat close, knees raised, while the bronze insect loomed over them. A dribble of mucus from the creature’s mouth hit the floor. Carrie squirmed and eased away from the splatter as it steamed.

Looking up from beneath, Carrie noticed for the first time that Gavin had an opening at the centre of his abdomen, surrounded by soft tissue and leading to darkness within.

“I’m sorry, Gavin, I didn’t expect you to talk to me with pheromones, I—”

“Gavin? Who is this Gavin?”

Carrie frowned. “But...aren’t you...?”

The alien loomed closer, until its knife-like inner mandibles were filling Carrie’s field of vision. “I will ask you once more. To whom are you referring? I know no one of that name. And who is this other human accompanying you? Who gave you permission to bring him with you? Are you aware of the laws regarding the use of transgalactic gateways? I authorised only one entity. Why are there two of you?” The jaws retracted and the head lowered and tilted, bringing the multitude of eyes within an inch or two of Dave’s face, which turned a ghostly white.

“C-C-Carrie, I did say this wasn’t a good idea.”

Carrie squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed. “Right, let’s sort this out. Come on,” she said to Dave, grabbing his arm and pulling him up as she rose to her feet. Recalling Gavin’s cultural misunderstanding of the human need for body space, she said, “Would you mind stepping back a bit, please? You’re crowding us.”

The insect shuffled marginally backwards, and Carrie and Dave simultaneously exhaled.

“Gavin,” said Carrie, “what’s going on? Why aren’t you speaking English?”

A vanilla odour crept into the spicy scent and the creature’s head reverted to vertical. Its antennae became still. “I believe I understand your mistake, though it is hardly credible. You imagine me to be your former manager.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “You aren’t Gavin?”

Antennae wildly waving, and bobbing up and down on its long spider-like legs, the bug said, “If that was the Earth name of your

previous manager the answer is no, I am not him. Of course I am not. Do you have some kind of visual sense dysfunction? I had heard that humans had excellent eyesight. Are you unable to perceive the clear difference between myself and your former manager? ”

Peering at the creature’s head, body and many legs, Carrie said, “Umm...no?”

The creature scuttled around, turning full circle.

“Ow,” exclaimed Carrie, and unfastened Dave’s vice-like grip on her arm.

The spicy vanilla odour became laced with a growing stink. “I am female,” spat the creature.

In the following pause, a flush crept up Carrie’s cheeks. “Whoops, sorry.”

The bug turned away and reached out, touching a recess in the floor with a claw. “We will speak further in here,” she said as the door melted away and she disappeared through the entrance.

Carrie peeped over the edge and down into the room below. The drop was about two metres, but there seemed no other option but to follow. She sat down, dangling her legs beneath her, and lowered herself down as far as she could before jumping the rest of the way.

Dave followed and landed heavily next to her. “Ouch,” he said as he stood uncertainly, rotating his ankle. “I think I twisted it.”

Inside the room the lighting was dim, and the insect’s many eyes glimmered in the glow from the passageway above. Carrie held the translator out to Dave and they gripped it together. The alien seemed to have forgotten Carrie’s earlier request for some body space. As she approached them closely once more the two humans moved backwards until they could go no further, their backs pressed against the wall.

“Your confusion results from your expectations,” said the alien. “My name is Errruorerrrrrhch.” A stench of rotting fish filled the air.

“I—I’m sorry,” said Carrie.

“I said my name is Errruorerrrrrhch.”

“No, I heard you, I just...never mind.”

“You expected to meet the manager who formerly held responsibility for your assignments, but he is investigating the threat posed by the placktoids.

“For the foreseeable future you are under my management, and I can see that you require close supervision. Your previous manager was unreliable and I doubted his glowing recommendation from the outset. I see my suspicions have been confirmed. Your failure to perceive the clear differences in appearance between myself and him are evidence of poor observational skills. You will need to work hard to remedy this.

“You were also so late in attending our meeting that I was forced to roam the corridors to find you. Thirdly, you have brought with you an unauthorised companion. Your previous manager informed me of this human, but I did not give permission for him to attend your briefing. He is not to accompany you again. Unauthorised persons moving through gateways is a serious transgression of transgalactic law.”

“I told you,” murmured Dave.

“Now that I have given you your formal warnings, I will explain the nature of your forthcoming assignment, though I am uncertain of your ability to complete this task.”

Carrie’s heart sank. All her life she had failed at her jobs, but she’d thought she was beginning to turn the corner. Her work as a call centre supervisor was going quite well, and she thought she’d made a great impression in her first assignment for the Transgalactic Council. Now it looked as though her new manager had a low opinion of both Gavin and her. She sighed. Just as things were starting to improve she was back to square one.

Dave nudged her. “Wow, look at that.”

Beyond the alien bug’s imposing body, in the centre of the shadowy room, a hologram was forming. A wide landscape spread out. A snow-capped mountain range, surrounded by deep blue, wide lakes that disappeared into the horizon. Lush, verdant trees and plants cloaked the mountainsides up to the snow line, and on the lake beaches were tiny figures. The hologram zoomed in and showed people frolicking, laughing and chasing each other along the shore, swimming in the clear, turquoise water and relaxing on the sand.

“This is the planet Dandrobia, the site of your next assignment” said Erruorerrrrrhch.

“They’re aliens?” blurted Dave. “They look like us.”

“Your observation is correct. The dandrobians’ resemblance to humans has been noted and widely studied as a remarkable example of convergent evolution.”

Carrie recalled the beautiful Belinda, the stuck-up bank manager Gavin had called in to replace her when she wasn’t doing too well on her first assignment. Belinda had said she was half-dandrobian. Gazing at the idyllic scene, Carrie became lost in thought. *What a wonderful place. I wonder what it would be like to live there?*

Her insect boss’ tone cut through her musings. “Dandrobia is a prison planet.”

“Prison?” said Carrie. *Prison?* What had the dandrobians done to get sentenced to confinement on their home planet? As a Transgalactic Council Officer, after ten years’ service she could retire to the world of her choice. *Dandrobia*. She made a mental note of the name and

wondered if they allowed dogs and cats.

“The necessary information is in your briefing documents, but I can tell you what you need to know. Dandrobia’s gravity is 80 per cent of Earth’s, but this won’t have any long-lasting physical effect on you for the brief time you will be there.

“The dandrobians have been confined to their planet for thousands of Earth years. They are one of the oldest civilisations in the galaxy, and they once ruled it, invading, colonising and terrorising its citizens to its farthest reaches. After a long war the dandrobians were finally defeated and the Unity took over, founding the Transgalactic Council to facilitate the day-to-day running of galaxy affairs. After their defeat all dandrobian technology was confiscated and their society returned to a pre-industrial level of development. They are strictly prohibited from developing new technology.

“Now, your assignment involves one of the species tyrannised by the dandrobians, the squashpumps. Some time ago this species demanded a formal apology and reparations for the wrongs they suffered under dandrobian rule. As is usual in these cases, the settlement was reached only after a long period of negotiation. Unfortunately, the Liaison Officer assigned to mediate has been called away to help deal with the placktoid crisis, and could not witness the final agreement. That is your task.

“This is an easy, straightforward assignment, appropriate for an officer still within their probationary period, as you are. In view of your inexperience, I summoned you here to speak to you face to face. Your behaviour today has confirmed my reservations were correct and your previous manager overstated your abilities. Are you aware that if you fail an assignment during your probationary period you must attend remedial training, and if you fail that you are dismissed? Perhaps you concur this task may be beyond you?”

Carrie did not answer. She always struggled to pay attention when people spoke to her at length, and she was distracted by the beautiful scene playing out in the hologram. Dave elbowed her, snapping her out of her trance.

“What?”

“She thinks you can’t do the job,” he whispered. “She’s offering you the chance of turning it down.”

“Oh no,” Carrie said, her eyes on the people laughing and having fun on the beach, “I can do it, no problem. Don’t worry about me.”

Dave sighed and rolled his eyes.

## Chapter Three – Off to a Bad Start

BACK HOME, IN CARRIE'S kitchen, she hoisted her Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer's handbag higher on her shoulder.

"Now you're sure you've got everything?" asked Dave.

"Of course I've got everything." She silently wished her friend would stop being so bossy, though, in truth, the prospect of travelling to Dandrobia didn't seem as enticing as it had while Errruorerrrrrhch was explaining the assignment. "This is all I have to take, you know that. So you're going to look after Toodles and Rogue for me?"

"They don't need looking after. You'll be back only a minute or two after you leave."

"I mean, just in case...I don't come back."

"Don't be silly. Of course you'll come back. It's only a meeting, Carrie."

She nodded. He was right. This assignment was nothing like her first. After being submerged in the custard-like ootoon and fighting the placktoid commanding officer, a giant intelligent office shredder, witnessing a statement of apology and reparations from the dandrobians to their former victims should be a piece of cake.

Not only that, this time round she had studied the briefing information Errruorerrrrrhch had provided. She had learned her lesson about being uninformed, and she was not going to make the same mistake again, though the report on the dandrobians had been nearly as boring as the complaints procedures she had to follow in her call centre supervisor role. She did not understand much of it, that was the problem. She wasn't one of the few humans who knew all about life on other planets and the whole Unity setup. There seemed to be lots to learn.

One piece of information that had fascinated her was that the dandrobians were immortal. They had become masters of genetic manipulation eons ago, preventing themselves from aging and creating a kind of paradise where all their needs were met. The dandrobian representatives she was about to meet were the same aliens who had ruled the galaxy while humans still believed that the stars were gods.

"Carrie? You only have a minute to go, you know?"

"Yes, I'm ready." She bit her lip. "I wish you were coming too."

"Your new boss made it very clear that I'm not allowed."

"I know, but still..." Carrie once more doubted that she could have made it through her previous assignment without her friend's support. Could she do this alone, no matter how straightforward the job was?

She hoisted her bag up again, and patted Rogue on the head. His long pink tongue flopped out and his tail thumped on the floor. Carrie had already said goodbye to Toodles and bore the scratches to prove it. Apparently her cat had not wanted to be disturbed from her sleep, but Carrie felt confident that, deep down, she was sad to see her go.

The cupboard door beneath Carrie's kitchen sink began to glow, and Carrie's hand grew sweaty as she clutched her handbag's strap. She was as prepared as she could be. If she messed this one up there was no one to blame but herself. Feeling sick, she said, "This is it, then."

With a bang, the cupboard door flew open. A swirling green mist appeared, transgalactic gateway to Dandrobia. The mist tugged at the air. Carrie swallowed. At least there was one thing to look forward to: Dandrobia seemed to be some kind of paradise. Wisps of mist drifted from the cupboard and lifted her hair, pulling it towards the vortex. Dave patted Rogue, who was barking at the green vapour. Toddles' yowl echoed around the flat.

Carrie stepped forward, but hesitated. She had remembered that her good friend Dave had a habit of taking things that did not belong to him. Though she had promised herself she would not say the words that were on her lips, but she couldn't help it and they spilled out anyway. "While I'm gone, you won't...you won't..."

"What? I won't what?" Dave frowned.

The green mist lifting her up, she said, "I know where everything is, you know." She just had time to catch her friend's glare before she was drawn under the sink.

The last sounds she heard as she entered the gateway were Rogue's fading bark and Dave calling, "I have a condition."

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LANDING ON A PILE OF downy cushions, Carrie sank so deep that she was buried to her waist and only her legs were left free.

"Mmmrf," she said as she struggled to emerge, imagining what kind of a first impression she must be making on the dandrobians. They had been informed of her arrival and were no doubt watching her. In her mind's eye she saw her plump, tightly clad, fluorescent legs wriggling in the air. The only upside was that the cushions and lower gravity made for a far softer landing than she was used to when travelling by transgalactic gateway.

Strong hands gripped her and pulled her free, setting her firmly but gently on her feet. Sweeping her hair off her face, she found herself at eye-level with a large dandrobian bosom, draped in vivid

green, silky material. Carrie craned her neck to look up at the creature's face before turning in a circle to see the seven aliens waiting to greet her, smiling politely.

In the recording Erruorerrrrrhch had shown her, the dandrobians had looked human-sized, but she now she realised her sense of scale had been wrong. Though dandrobian bodies and faces were very similar to humans, they were much taller, averaging about 220 centimetres.

"Welcome to Dandrobia," said the female who had extracted Carrie from the cushions. She was shorter than the others and had ebony hair that was piled on top of her head.

Carrie gazed, open-mouthed, at the alien's face. She was the most stunningly beautiful creature she had ever seen. With an effort, she closed her lower jaw. "Thank you, and thanks for providing the cushions." As she studied the other dandrobians more closely, it was as much as she could do to drag her eyes from one face to the next, their features were so even and perfectly proportioned. Strong, well-defined muscles lined each alien's arms and neck, though their expressions were polite and mild.

"Welcome to Dandrobia," echoed the assembled aliens in a drawn-out, cooing tone.

The silky material that covered their perfect physiques was in vivid, bright jewel shades that gleamed in the strong sunlight beaming through the windows of the hall. Each dandrobian also wore an identical shell-like, golden brooch, either clasping the material at their shoulders or elsewhere on their bodies. One dandrobian wore his in his hair.

The room was long, wide, and empty but for the piled cushions, which, Carrie suddenly realised, were actually rounded, dense clumps of soft, dried moss. Like the dandrobians themselves, the room's shape seemed in perfect proportion and was pleasing to look at. The walls bore brightly coloured friezes of dandrobians performing simple tasks. Both the images and the room seemed familiar to Carrie, though she couldn't understand why.

"This is our receiving hall, my dear," said the ebony-haired woman, spreading her arm wide. "Please accompany us and we'll take you to a retiring room where you may rest and prepare for the reconciliation meeting."

"Thank you" Carrie followed the dandrobians as they led the way out of the hall, her tense muscles relaxing. This was very different from her previous assignment. She shouldn't have worried so much.

Leaving the hall, the party stepped out onto deep green, fine, mossy turf that sank beneath their feet as they walked across it and sprang up behind, leaving no trace of footprints. Carrie felt strangely



light as she walked in the low gravity. Surrounding them were single-story buildings, all as well-proportioned as the receiving hall, all decorated in rich colours. The source of the intense daylight was a large sun high in the sky, giving out pink-tinged beams.

Other dandrobians were crossing the turf or lounging around outside. They all stopped what they were doing and watched Carrie. She also noticed several faces at windows, but the dandrobians did not seem at all aggressive or confrontational, only curious. Carrie wondered about their history. She had expected something quite different from these mild, relaxed aliens, something more intense and confrontational in their nature. Was this a case of the victor rewriting history, or maybe the Transgalactic Council's information was simply wrong, as it had been before? In her previous assignment it had been up to her to find the truth about the ootoon.

"Here we are," said the female dandrobian and invited Carrie to enter a building. Inside was a single room containing a chaise longue large enough to accommodate a dandrobian. A tap was mounted on the wall, and in the centre of the room was a low table. A more simple yet tasteful room Carrie had never seen, but she drew back. On the floor just inside the threshold was a large, dirty grey slug.

"Urgh," she said, and picked up the slug between the tips of her finger and thumb. As she flicked it out onto the grassy sward, there was a collective gasp from the dandrobians.

The female stuttered, "I-I would like you to meet the Foreign Secretary of the squashpumps."

## Chapter Four – A Poor Reflection

THE SQUASHPUMP FOREIGN Secretary had landed upside down about three metres away on the soft turf. The creature's departing yell echoed in Carrie's mind via the translator in her toolbox. Her hands flew to her mouth. She shut her eyes and thanked her lucky stars that her squeamishness about harming living creatures had prevented her from stamping on the squashpump official. "I'm so sorry," she gasped as she ran to the creature's side.

About ten centimetres long and slimy as a slug, the squashpump wriggled as it tried to right itself, its pale grey underbelly undulating. Carrie squatted down to pick it up. "Put me down immediately," shouted the creature. It had a broad Scottish accent, which sounded so odd, given its appearance, that Carrie grabbed her mouth again, this time trying to contain a snort of laughter. She did not succeed.

After whipping around onto its front, the squashpump reared up so that the front end of its body was perpendicular to the ground. Or Carrie assumed it was the front end. The creature seemed to have no eyes, though a collection of moist stalks emerged from the raised end. It looked like a limp, wet toilet brush. Her stomach squirmed, but then the squashpump began to change colour. A rainbow of hues played over its skin, and Carrie's opinion changed. The squashpump Foreign Secretary was in fact quite pretty. It spoke, rolling its Rs.

"Y're Transgalactic Intercultural Community—"

"Yes, that's me," Carrie cut in. "I'm very, very sorry about that. I had no idea you were, well..."

"Yes?" The tentacles wriggled.

Carrie shifted to a kneeling position and bent down as low as she could. "...I'm just very sorry."

"We have a little time before the meeting is due to start, dear," said the female dandrobian towering beside her. "Now that you and the Foreign Secretary have met, would you like to refresh yourself and prepare?"

"That's a good idea," said Carrie, silently thanking the alien for providing a face-saving exit from the awkward situation. She stood and straightened her jumpsuit, which continued to pull in all the wrong places. "I'd love to. Unless..." She looked down at the diminutive squashpump, which remained half upright and sprouting its floppy stalks. "...Unless the Foreign Secretary would like me to carry her, or him, to the meeting place?"

"No I wouldna," came the Foreign Secretary's terse reply.

"Of course not," said Carrie. "How stupid of me. Of course you're perfectly capable of getting there all by yourself. I don't know why I

said that.”

The Foreign Secretary gave no reply, and the dandrobians watched her gravely. In the growing silence Carrie cleared her throat and smiled tightly as she tried to force away the flush that was creeping across her cheeks.

The ebony-haired female dandrobian silently gestured towards the doorway to the retiring room. Carrie gave a stiff bow, hoping that was what she was supposed to do, went inside and closed the door behind her, exhaling a long, slow breath. She threw herself onto the wooden chaise longue and buried her head in her arms. The action did not lessen the cringing feeling that gripped her.

It hadn't occurred to her to research the squashpumps' appearance. She'd known what the dandrobians looked like and had assumed the squashpumps would look, well, alien in some kind of obvious way. The briefing information on them had not mentioned what their physical form was, and Errruorerrrrrhch hadn't said anything either. Maybe squashpumps were so well known throughout the galaxy it hadn't occurred to anyone to include a description. But how could she, a mere Earthling, a member of a species that had not sufficiently advanced to join the Unity, be expected to know what a squashpump looked like?

She groaned and turned onto her back, gazing up at the ceiling. She hadn't got off to a good start, not good at all. If word of her behaviour got back to her new boss, Errruorerrrrrhch would see it as a confirmation that Carrie was incompetent. She sat up. She would just have to try harder from now on.

On the table were a beaker and a plate holding circles of creamy bread. She reached over and broke off a hunk. Taking a bite, she let out an involuntary “Mmmm.” The taste was not like any bread she had ever eaten. It was warm, sweet, rich and soft, like cake but without any cloying fattiness. And it melted away in her mouth like chocolate before settling satisfyingly in her stomach, feeling like the healthiest thing she had ever eaten.

Wondering what kind of drink the tap supplied, she picked up the beaker. It was made of a translucent material that shimmered like mother-of-pearl. Holding the beaker beneath the spout, Carrie turned on the tap and a clear, yellow-tinged liquid flowed out. The flavour was sweet but complex, and it slipped easily down her throat. She refilled the beaker, but as she tipped back her head to take another drink, she stopped. Sighing, she returned the beaker to the table. She had caught sight her reflection in a mirror that stretched from floor to ceiling in the corner of the room. It was the reflection of a short, plump, messy-haired woman wearing a bright orange jumpsuit that was much too small and had grass stains on the knees.

Shoulders drooping, she went to the mirror for a closer inspection. Rising up out of her hair was a stubborn kink that had defeated her attempts to blow dry it flat, and the rest of her hair was a mess of wayward strands. She peered at her face. As always, her pudgy nose looked too large against her small chin, and her eyes did not quite match up. The ill-fitting jumpsuit highlighted her other imperfections. The zip was threatening to burst, and her hips had pulled the material into a crease below her belly.

What had possessed her to choose a uniform that was the size she wanted to be rather than the size she actually was? She tried squatting and doing some practice kicks. The jumpsuit seams threatened to tear, and she had to stop. Her uniform would severely impede her movement if she had to call upon her martial arts skills. It was unlikely she would need to fight for this assignment, but her long years of training in Bagua Zhang had proven useful previously and might do so again.

There was a knock at the door. As Carrie turned, the female dandrobian opened it and peeked in. "The meeting's about to begin," she said as she entered, her emerald green garment sweeping the floor. Carrie was struck again by the alien's beauty. Strands of rich ebony cascaded from the hair piled on her head, and her wide eyes were perfectly balanced by her bow-shaped lips. Her bare arms tapered gently down to long, graceful fingers. Carrie suddenly felt plumper and plainer than ever.

"Transgalactic Intercultural—"

"Call me Carrie."

The alien smiled. "Thank you. It's much nicer to be friendly, don't you think? And you must call me Apaté. Are you refreshed, Carrie?"

"Yes, thanks." She went to pick up her toolbox from the table, then paused as she realised she had understood the dandrobian even though she had not been close to her translator. "You can speak English?"

Holding the door open, Apaté said, "Oh yes, we've had several English-speaking visitors from Earth in recent times."

Carrie's eyes widened. "Visitors from Earth?" she murmured. Gavin had told her that Earth could not join the Unity until humans achieved deep space travel, but he had not, as far as she could remember, said explicitly that humans were forbidden from leaving Earth. She herself travelled to other worlds, after all, and Belinda, the half-dandrobian banker she had met on her previous assignment, must have been conceived somehow. Carrie frowned.

While she was musing, Apaté waited patiently at the door. Carrie noticed her, smiled apologetically and went out, blinking in the strong light. She set her shoulders. She had prepared well for this meeting by

reading up on the United Nations and similar organisations and studying the art of diplomacy. She was going to be a model of professionalism and decorum and prove her new boss wrong.

## Chapter Five – Trouble in Paradise

AS THEY WALKED BETWEEN the low buildings, Carrie said, “Thanks for helping me out with the Foreign Secretary back there, Apaté—is that your first or last name?” Like the buildings and the dandrobians, the name sounded familiar.

“We have only one name, dear. Each of us has a different name, you see, those few of us who are left.”

“Oh, has your population been shrinking? On Earth, that’s happening in a few countries. Low birth rates. But...” Carrie frowned. “How come? I heard dandrobians are immortal.”

Apaté smiled sadly. “Immortal but not indestructible. Every year we lose people to accidents.”

“But surely births make up for deaths?”

The corners of Apaté’s mouth turned lower. “Carrie, darling, when the Unity confined us here, they altered our genetic material so that we could no longer reproduce with each other. There are no births on Dandrobia. Our own genetic modification that allowed male dandrobians to cross breed with species from other worlds was not altered—a small concession by the Unity—but all pregnancies are brought to birth off-planet.” Apaté’s tone softened. “Essentially, they gave our species a death sentence.”

Carrie grimaced. The conversation was turning far heavier than she had intended. “What’s your job, Apaté? I mean, what’s your role in this negotiation with the squashpumps?”

“I am a facilitator, much like yourself, my love. I don’t think English has a word for what I do, but I smooth relations, organise gatherings, convey communications too delicate to be recorded in any permanent way.”

“We do have similar jobs,” said Carrie, nodding. “It isn’t easy, is it? Keeping people happy, I mean.”

Apaté’s smile returned, and she displayed white, even teeth. “No, it isn’t.”

Carrie was warming to this dandrobian. It was comforting to know there was at least one of them who understood her role as a Liaison Officer. This female alien seemed so nice and reasonable, Carrie wondered again about this species that had once tyrannised the galaxy. Maybe the dandrobians had changed in the long years of their imprisonment? How long had Erruorerrrrrhch said it had been? Thousands of Earth years. They could have changed a lot in that time.

She walked with Apaté beyond the complex and out into open ground. As they rounded a corner that brought them to a full view of the surrounding landscape, Carrie caught her breath. The sight was

even more beautiful than the hologram Errruorerrrrrhch had shown her. Spread before them were wide, rolling hills that ran down to a brightly sparkling, blue-green sea. Swathes of long, verdant grasses and wildflowers clothed the hills in pastel and vivid shades, and a balmy breeze sent the grass and flowers into undulating waves, mimicking the motion of the water at the pearly white shoreline.

Carrie stopped for a moment, taking in the view. Apate stood with her, also regarding the landscape.

She sighed. "It seems very beautiful to you, doesn't it? But if you can never leave, the most beautiful place is still a prison."

Shaking her head, Carrie struggled to accept the idea that anyone would want to leave Dandrobia. Maybe Apate was comparing her fate with her memories of the time when she had roamed wherever she had wanted, far and wide across the entire galaxy.

Continuing their walk, they descended a flowery hillside that led to a platform on a hill about ten metres high next to the sea, providing a wide view. Dandrobians were already on the platform, and Carrie assumed the squashpumps were also present, though she could not see them at the distance. A perfume was filling her nostrils, either from the wildflowers or perhaps the alien sea. Atop a hill to their left was a large, single story, rectangular building. Wondering why it was set apart from the rest, Carrie asked Apate what it was.

The dandrobian paused slightly before answering. "It's our main governmental building, dear. There are work rooms, meeting rooms and a library."

"A library? With books?" asked Carrie, her eyebrows rising.

Shrugging, Apate said, "We must record information somehow. We aren't allowed any more complex technology."

They were nearing the platform, and the seated dandrobians began to turn as they noticed their arrival. Carrie double-checked she had her translator, which would record the statements from both sides at the meeting. With her there as a witness, the recording provided a legally binding agreement.

Carrie had her bag open and was peering in when Apate drove into her side, sending her sprawling to the ground. She landed heavily.

"Foreign Secretary, I hope your journey was pleasant," said Apate, addressing a squashpump on the patch of grass where Carrie had just been about to tread.

Thank goodness. Once more, Apate had saved her from an embarrassing and potentially disastrous diplomatic incident. She was going to have to look more carefully where she was treading all the while she was there. Scrambling to her feet, Carrie said, "Foreign Secretary, I'm pleased to see you again."

The squashpump did not deign to reply but continued sliding

royally and surprisingly quickly towards the platform.

Carrie wondered why the squashpumps had not invented a speedier way of getting around. Though the Foreign Secretary's progress was fast for its size, it would be at a big disadvantage when it came to escaping or defending itself. During their invasion of the squashpump planet, the dandrobians could have, and maybe had, literally walked all over them.

Apate led Carrie up the slope to the platform. In the reduced gravity, the climb was easy.

"Thanks for stopping me from squashing the Foreign Secretary back there," she murmured to Apate as they reached the top.

"Apate, darling," burst out some dandrobians as soon as they saw them step onto the platform. Apate's friends skipped over and hugged her, kissing her cheeks lightly.

After returning their affectionate greeting, Apate showed Carrie to a wide seat strewn with cushions like those that had been spread to soften her landing when she arrived. The seat was built for a dandrobian and she had to climb onto it, but she sank gratefully into the cushions. Her legs dangled. Settling herself in, Carrie found her heart was thudding and her mouth was dry. Though her role was minor, she was desperate to get it right.

In a circle around the platform dandrobians were on seats similar to Carrie's, interspersed with thin columns. On top of each column sat a squashpump. Only one was empty. Now that Carrie was there, everyone awaited the squashpump Foreign Secretary. It was crossing the ground and soon began gliding up the side of the empty column.

Some of the squashpumps reared up and their many flaccid stalks sprouted from their heads as they apparently prepared for the meeting. The sea breeze grew stronger, sending the squashpump tentacles waving. Carrie did not think she would ever look at a plate of spaghetti the same way again.

She mentally went over the words she had rehearsed to get the meeting started. She had memorised them and the points of the final dandrobian and squashpump agreement. She'd thought that reading them from her briefing document would look unprofessional. Now she wished she had the words in her hand in case she dried up mid-speech. Referring to her notes would not look as bad as standing there like a fish out of water, mouth open but nothing coming out.

The Foreign Secretary had nearly reached the top of his column. Carrie was sure the creature had slowed up in order to make more of an entrance. She jumped down from her seat and stood in front of it, hoping to give her short form—topped by frizzy out-of-control hair, whipping round her face in the breeze—some dignity and gravitas.

As she opened her mouth, an especially strong gust from the ocean



blew in, taking her words from her. At the same time, the wind toppled a squashpump column: the one the Foreign Secretary had been climbing. The creature had not quite made it over the edge, and as the column hit the ground its soft body was severed neatly in two.

## Chapter Six – Revenge of the Squashpumps

CARRIE AND THE DANDROBIANS gaped at the body of the squashpump Foreign Secretary. Only one half of it was visible, next to the downed column's lip. The other was half hidden beneath it. The visible end twitched, and Carrie jumped; then she remembered her position and tried to compose herself. "I—er—I..." trickled out, but no more words came. She had to say something, but she had no idea what. No one had explained what a Transgalactic Council Officer was supposed to do when a member of a negotiating side died in a freak accident.

The dandrobians were getting to their feet and looking around uncertainly, and Carrie became aware of the faint squeaking of the gathered squashpumps, some of whom were sliding rapidly down their columns. Realising she could not understand what they were saying because her translator was too far from her, she reached for it. As her hand closed around the cylinder, the squashpumps' cries were sharp in her mind.

"It's a trap," they were shouting. "An ambush. They've tricked us and now they plan to massacre us. Defend yourselves squashpumps. Get the dandrobians. Take down the enemy!"

At these words, despite the crisis, Carrie's alarm faded into curiosity. The small, soft squashpumps were going to attack the large, muscular dandrobians? She wondered if they had a secret corrosive slime or some other hidden weapon. The dandrobians clearly understood what the squashpumps were about to do because their reaction was immediate. Panic seized them and they began to run away.

The squashpumps compressed like concertinas into squat folds. Carrie gazed at them, fascinated. Then, the creatures sprang into the air and, like speeding bullets, they flew towards the departing dandrobians, landing on their heads and faces. Screaming and shouting, the dandrobians batted, swiped and pulled at the squashpumps, but they stuck like glue and, almost too quickly for Carrie to see, they disappeared inside the dandrobians. Up noses and into mouths and ears they slithered. One even slid into the corner of a dandrobian's eye.

"Urghhhh...squashpumps, no," she shouted. "Leave the dandrobians alone at once. I command you as a representative of the Transgalactic Council."

But the squashpumps either didn't hear or didn't care what she said. Dandrobian screams turned to shrieks. Some sped down the hill as if trying to escape the squashpumps inside them, while others spun,

writhed and jumped, flailing their arms or hitting themselves on the head, trying to dislodge the aliens.

Carrie did not know what to do. This was a time for action, not diplomacy. She wanted to try to save the dandrobians, but there had been no time, and now it was too late. And she was pretty sure that she, as a member of the Transgalactic Council, should not attack the squashpumps herself. She had to remain neutral in all disputes. Removing the squashpumps from the dandrobians' heads also wasn't an option because she didn't know how. Should she run away? The squashpumps didn't seem intent on attacking her. A hand grabbed her arm. She turned to see Apaté, who had been hiding behind her seat.

"You must leave," she said, radiating shock and fear.

"No, I should stay and help."

Apaté shook her head, her lips tight, her eyes wide. "You don't understand. There's a whole ship of squashpumps. When they hear what's happened to their Foreign Secretary, they'll attack and you won't be able to stop them. You have to get out."

"But...I can't just leave you."

"You can't stay. Go. The negotiations are over."

Carrie looked around. "I suppose you're right," she said uncertainly.

Dandrobians were running down the hill, violently shaking their heads. The squashpumps who hadn't managed to land on a dandrobian were swiftly gliding after them, over the platform and into the grass.

"There isn't much time," said Apaté. "A battalion of squashpumps will be on its way."

There seemed no alternative but to leave. Carrie's brow wrinkled in concentration, trying to remember what Errruorerrrrrhch had said about contacting her when she needed a gateway. She was very reluctant to do it. Her alien insect manager would no doubt blame her for the situation and take it as evidence of her incompetency, but Apaté was right, there was not much she could do. It would be better for her to return to Dandrobia later, when tensions had calmed down a bit.

She recalled that all she had to do to talk to Errruorerrrrrhch was to say her manager's title and name into the translator. "Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrh." Hearing no reply, Carrie repeated, "Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrh." Still nothing. She must be pronouncing the name wrong. *Damn that bug*, she thought. *Why couldn't she have given herself a name that humans can actually pronounce? Like Gavin?* She tried again but there was no answer.

Apaté was looking fearfully around, her hands over her face,

shielding her eyes. "Hurry up," she said. "They'll be here any minute."

"Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrh," said Carrie desperately. "Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrhch." Her dry throat caused her to cough very slightly at the end of the final word.

"Yes?"

"Oh, thank goodness."

"I can hear shouting. I stopped the recording. What's happening? The meeting can't possibly be over yet. What do you want?"

Carrie quickly explained what had happened.

Skepticism dripped from the reply Errruorerrrrrhch gave. "All you had to do was witness the statements from both sides. Are you saying you did nothing to provoke this breakdown?"

"I told you, it was an accident. It was the wind. But the squashpumps took it as an attack."

"And what did you do to prevent their reaction?"

"I couldn't do anything. There wasn't time."

Apate was wringing her hands. She mouthed, *You must go*.

"A dandrobian informs me a contingent of squashpumps will continue the attack." Carrie swallowed and grimaced. "I think I should leave for the time being."

"In the circumstances I am forced to agree, unfortunately," came the curt reply. "I will open a gateway to return you to Earth. We will have to wait for a lull in the hostilities before resuming the mediation process. *If* I allow you to continue the assignment, it will have to be at a later time and after I've received a full report from you on exactly what has happened." There was a click as Errruorerrrrrhch broke the connection.

Carrie's heart sank. She turned off the translator.

To her left, behind her seat, wisps of green mist were appearing. Carrie slipped her translator into her bag and prepared herself for the almost instantaneous journey home. It felt like stepping from one place to another, even though she was travelling perhaps hundreds of thousands of light years. The mist whirled into a spiral and began to thicken and deepen in colour.

Apate stared at it, her expression odd. When she realised Carrie was watching her, her face smoothed into a smile.

The swirling mist tugged at Carrie's hair and clothes. She gripped her bag tightly. If she let go of it between worlds she might never see it again. Her stomach clenched as she wondered what happened to people who were lost during the journey. "I'll be back as soon as I can," she told Apate. "Don't worry, I'm sure the Transgalactic Council can fix everything. It's just a hiccup."

Apate did not answer. A strange, hungry look had formed on her

face. Carrie wondered what the dandrobian was thinking, but there was no time to ask her. The force from the green mist was pulling strongly now. She stepped forward and bent down, attempting to go through feet first this time to avoid a painful landing on her head at the other side. But, as always, the mist grabbed her upper torso and sucked her in headfirst.

Carrie's ankle felt odd, as if someone were holding it, just before she emerged in her familiar kitchen. She slid across the floor face down. Rubbing her nose, she sat up. Dave and Rogue were not far from where they'd been when she had left, but they were not looking at her, they were looking behind her. Carrie followed their gaze to see Apaté sitting on the floor, a wide grin on her face.

## Chapter Seven – Uninvited Guest

UNABLE TO BELIEVE HER eyes, Carrie turned to her friend. Dave's face was a picture as he looked from Apaté to Carrie and back again. Rogue began to bark.

Apaté stood, brushed down her emerald green robes and adjusted the golden clasp at her shoulder. "That landing was a little rough." Standing more than two metres tall, she made the small kitchen look even tinier.

Carrie was frozen to the floor. "But—but..."

"Carrie..." said Dave slowly, his eyes fixed on Apaté's statuesque figure, "who's this?"

Rogue had stopped barking. He had dropped to the floor and was glaring at the dandrobian. His low growl rumbled in the silence.

Apaté pointed at the dog. "What's that, Carrie, my dear?" she asked, her voice tremulous.

Getting to her feet, Carrie said, "It's a dog. My dog. His name's Rogue. Apaté, you shouldn't have done that. You shouldn't have followed me. You'll get me into a world of trouble." She fished in her toolbox for her translator, mentally cursing the escaped dandrobian. Errruorerrrrrhch was not going to like this. Not at all. And Carrie would be the one to take the blame.

Apaté's smile faded and she looked down. "I was so afraid of what the squashpumps might do to me. I'm sorry, Carrie, darling. So sorry. You'd better call someone to send me back, though perhaps..."

Carrie had found the translator. Her finger was on the button to turn it on. "Perhaps what?" If there was a chance of avoiding the repercussions of Apaté's actions she wanted to hear it.

"Well, you'll be returning to Dandrobia when the fighting's over, won't you? Perhaps I could stay here with you until you go back, and I could slip in again quietly. In all the disruption no one would even miss me—"

"You're supposed to be confined to your planet with the other dandrobians," exclaimed Carrie. "Following me here—it's like you've broken out of jail."

Apaté's head fell until her chin was grazing her chest. "I was frightened. You saw what the squashpumps can do." She looked up shyly. "But maybe if I stay here, just for a short time, no one needs to know, do they? We can keep it between you and me, and your friend." She gave Dave a dazzling smile.

The smile did nothing to soften the deep crease between his eyebrows. "Carrie," he repeated, "who's this?"

She sighed. "This is Apaté. She's a dandrobian. The meeting broke

down and the squashpumps started to attack. She followed me here.”

“I can see that. And now you’re going to contact your manager to tell her so that she can send her back.” It was more of a statement than a question.

Her finger still on the translator button, Carrie hesitated.

“Oh, must you?” said Apaté, looking from one human to the other. “I won’t go anywhere. I’ll stay here in—your home, is it? It’s lovely. And when the battle’s over and you return, I’ll go with you, I promise.” A tear formed at the corner of one of her eyes and slid prettily down her cheek. Her lower lip trembled. “Couldn’t you keep me safe for a just a little while?”

Her beauty and vulnerability tugged at Carrie’s heartstrings, though Rogue continued to growl. She frowned as she wondered why. Her dog was usually overly friendly with strangers and the worst guard dog in the world. “Rogue, be quiet. What’s wrong with you?” Maybe he could sense Apaté was an alien, even though in human society she would pass as a very tall and very beautiful woman.

Dave was glaring at Carrie, and Apaté was pleading with her eyes. Carrie buried her head in her hands as she tried to decide what to do. She was certain Erruorerrrrrhch would expect Carrie to inform her immediately about what had happened and would return Apaté right away. But her new manager would also definitely blame Carrie, even though there was nothing she could have done to prevent Apaté’s escape. On the other hand, if she did as Apaté asked and kept her safe in her flat until things had calmed down in Dandrobia, Erruorerrrrrhch need never know what had happened, and Carrie would not get the blame for something that was not her fault. There was even a chance she could reinstate the reparations agreement despite the setback and prove to her boss that she truly deserved the praise Gavin had given her.

Dave squatted down and ruffled Rogue’s head and neck. “What’s up with you, then?” He looked up at Carrie. “Can I speak to you in private?”

She followed him into the hallway. As he closed the kitchen door, Apaté’s eyes became fixed on the growling dog, and she backed into a corner.

“Tell me you aren’t thinking about letting her stay,” Dave said. “You cannot let her stay.”

Carrie put her hands on her hips. “Hey, I’m the one working for the Transgalactic Council, remember?” Who did he think he was? “It’s my decision.”

“No, it isn’t. I was there at your briefing, too.” He pointed at the kitchen door. “That woman, or dandrobian or whatever, is in prison for crimes she committed along with the rest of her tyrannical

species.” He pointed at Carrie. “You can’t let her out of Dandrobia. You don’t have the authority, and if you don’t tell your manager right now what’s happened, you’ll get into trouble and probably lose your job. You know, the job you love so much and are so determined to be a success at? You have no idea what might happen.”

Her lips drawing to a thin line, Carrie narrowed her eyes at Dave. “Thanks for the advice, but I’m perfectly capable of understanding what could happen all by myself.” She moved towards the kitchen.

“Carrie,” said Dave, grabbing her, “think about it.”

She pulled her arm from his grasp. If there was one thing she did not like about her friend, it was his unasked-for advice. “I’ll do what I like,” she replied between her teeth as she opened the kitchen door.

Apate was still at bay in the corner, watched by an alert Rogue. She turned and looked apprehensively but hopefully at Carrie.

It was already too late to tell Errruorerrrrrhch about the escaped dandrobian, Carrie decided. Her manager would only add the delay to her list of other reasons to conclude that Carrie was incompetent. She had no choice, really. She would do as Apate suggested and hope that Errruorerrrrrhch never found out. Smiling tightly, she said, “You can stay until I go back, but you mustn’t leave my flat, okay?” Apate ran towards her, and she found herself being crushed into a large bosom.

“Thank you so much,” the dandrobian breathed. “I’ll do whatever you say, darling. I promise.”



## Chapter Eight – Apate Makes Herself at Home

CARRIE HEARD IRRITATION in Errruorerrrrrhch's tone as she spoke to her manager, even though she had sent in a very detailed and mostly truthful report in the intervening day since she returned from Dandrobia. Of course, she had left out the part about Apate returning with her.

"Point the translator away from you into an open area," said Errruorerrrrrhch.

Placing the device on her coffee table, Carrie pointed it at the space in front of her television. A bright, hazy beam shone out, containing a hologram of her giant insectoid Transgalactic Council manager. Towering nearly to Carrie's ceiling, Errruorerrrrrhch's form was only slightly less horrific and fantastical than it was in real life.

She was alone in the room. Dave had left in a huff the previous night, refusing even to say goodbye, and she had shut the door firmly behind him in a satisfied way, mentally pushing aside a little, niggling doubt that maybe he was right. Apate had spent most of her stay asleep in Carrie's bed, after complaining that Earth's stronger gravity made her tired. Carrie had slept curled uncomfortably on her sofa.

"I have received communications from the squashpumps and the dandrobians, each telling a different tale, as is standard in these cases," said Errruorerrrrrhch. "A comparison of both sides of the story with your report gives what appears to be the closest approximation to the truth, and I can see that I made the correct decision in removing you from the scene of the conflict."

Carrie rolled her eyes, then stopped as she wondered if the hologram was a two-way thing and her manager could read human body language.

"I must admit," continued the insectoid alien, "that the objectivity and detail of your report are at a level I would expect of a Transgalactic Council Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer."

*Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence,* thought Carrie. What else had the bug expected of her? She said nothing, waiting to hear when she would be going back to Dandrobia, as she was extremely keen to return Apate to her home world. In the time since Dave had left, she'd struggled more and more to deny the truth of his words. Maybe it was only because he had insisted she tell her manager about Apate that she had let the dandrobian stay.

But it was too late to go back on her decision. If she told Errruorerrrrrhch about Apate now, a day later, it would definitely be curtains for her.

"Squashpumps have infested a number of dandrobians," said her

manager, "though neither side have exact figures on how many."

"The dandrobians don't know how many of them were killed?" Carrie's eyebrows lifted. Maybe no one would have noticed Apaté was missing either, in that case.

Errruorerrrrrhch's inner jaws protruded and she moved forwards, almost out of the hologram's beams. Carrie was glad her manager was tens of thousands of light years away.

"No dandrobians have been killed, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. I said they were infested. Squashpumps take up residence in the brains of their victims."

"And that doesn't kill them?" Carrie couldn't understand why information about the squashpumps' methods of attack hadn't been included in the briefing documents. Didn't Errruorerrrrrhch think it was important for her to know these things?

"A squashpump infestation only incapacitates. The victim cannot think or speak, only wander around randomly until meeting another living creature, whereupon the squashpump divides and one individual invades the new host."

Carrie breathed in sharply and her eyes grew wide. "Kind of like zombies," she exclaimed. She sat down as she contemplated a mental image of the huge dandrobians wandering the landscape on tottering legs, arms stretched out in front, heads and tongues lolling. She became lost in reverie. A pause stretched out. Returning to the present, Carrie cleared her throat. "So, what happens now?"

Errruorerrrrrhch blinked, one hundred transparent lids flicking across one hundred insectoid eyes. "The squashpumps feel they have adequately responded to the accident that befell their Foreign Secretary and have, at the Unity's demand, withdrawn all but their essential diplomatic presence. They are willing to meet with the dandrobians once more with a view to concluding the reconciliation process. The dandrobians also wish to continue the talks but have added an agenda item discussing the removal of the infesting squashpumps from their victims."

"Seems reasonable."

"I doubt there will be any difficulties on that account," said Errruorerrrrrhch. "The squashpumps spend a considerable period in their life cycle outside their hosts' bodies, and Dandrobia is much too dry a habitat for them. They have no intention of staying on the planet for the long term. Attacking the dandrobians was merely an instinctive reaction, I believe, and perhaps a show of force intended to intimidate."

Recalling the image of one of the slug-like creatures worming its way into a dandrobian eye socket, Carrie swallowed. Despite their diminutive size and harmless appearance, the squashpumps certainly

could be intimidating if they wanted to be.

“I am sending you the new agenda. Reparation figures must be agreed once again—the squashpumps wish to sue for more in consideration of what happened to their Foreign Secretary, and I am not sure the dandrobians will concede the additional cost—but the squashpumps have communicated that the wording of the formal public apology can remain the same.

“I will open a transgalactic gateway at eight a.m. your time. Please do not be late.”

Carrie frowned, irked at the implication she was unreliable, but she was relieved she would be able to get a good night’s sleep before returning to Dandrobia. It had been a long day, worrying about the dandrobian sleeping in her bed.

Thinking about the journey she would undertake the following morning, an idea occurred to her. “Wait a minute, can I ask you something? Whenever I return to Earth through a gateway, I always get back just after I left, so the gateways are passages through time as well as space. Couldn’t you send me back to Dandrobia just before the squashpump Foreign Secretary’s accident? Then I could grab the column before it fell, and none of the battle will have happened.”

“I cannot send you back to a previous time on Dandrobia,” replied her manager. “That would be illegal and most unwise. Altering the past has wide-ranging and unpredictable effects on the present. Only in the direst circumstances would the Transgalactic Council consider such an action. Returning you to Earth just after you left benefits the natural course of the time line because Earth is not in the Unity. Your inexplicable absence would cause disruptions to your and others’ lives.”

“I see,” said Carrie, her shoulders slumping. The vision she’d had of herself dashing in at the last moment,—surprising the hell out of the earlier Carrie—catching the column mid-fall, and heroically saving the Foreign Secretary’s life, melted away.

There was a metallic, squeaking sound. It was the noise of bed springs. Carrie’s bed springs. She froze. Apathe was awake and could come into the living room any minute. Would Errruorerrrrrhch be able to see her via the translator? Carrie could not take any chances. “Okay,” she said to her boss, “I’ll be ready at eight o’clock.”

“Thoroughly study the documents I’m sending through.”

Carrie reached for the translator. If Errruorerrrrrhch did not end their meeting soon, she would be forced to turn her off. “Yes, okay, I’ll read them tonight.”

“Please be sure that you do. The accident with the squashpump Foreign Secretary has put a different light on—”

Carrie heard her bedroom door open. “Yes, I understand. Goodbye,

then.” Apate had to be in the hallway and was probably heading over to see her.

“Good—”

Thumbing the translator off, Carrie exhaled as the hazy beam faded and the hologram of her manager blinked out. She was returning the device to her bag when Apate entered the room. The dandrobian had piled her hair up once more, and the top of the pile brushed the door frame. She stretched luxuriously. “I had the most marvellous sleep, Carrie, darling. Your bed is soooo comfortable.”

Rubbing the crick in her neck she had developed during her night on the sofa, Carrie said, “Yes, it is, isn’t it? Tonight’s your last night, though. We return to Dandrobia in the morning.”

Apate’s relaxed, happy expression crumbled. “So soon?” Energy and hope seemed to seep out of her. “I expected to have a little more time.” Her hands came up to her face, and she burst into tears. Her legs collapsed and she sat, a heap of draped green silk, weeping on the floor.

After a moment’s shock, Carrie said, “Apate, you can’t stay here forever. You said you would go back with me. I can’t let you stay. I’d lose my job.”

“I know, I know,” wept Apate. “But I love being away from Dandrobia. I’ve been there for so long. Thousands and thousands of years. It’s so boring being in the same place all the time. It’s stifling.”

“Dandrobia? Boring? But it’s beautiful. It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen. And you have everything you need there. You don’t want for anything.”

Sniffing and wiping her eyes, Apate said, “You wouldn’t understand, my dear. Have you ever been in prison?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Carrie, blinking as she wondered how prisoners on Earth would feel upon hearing idyllic Dandrobia compared to a jail.

“Everything’s always the same. Nothing ever changes. Day after day after day.” At each repetition of ‘day’ her voice hardened with frustration.

“But you created the perfect world,” exclaimed Carrie. “Why would you *want* anything to change?”

Apate tilted back her head so that her beautiful eyes looked directly into Carrie’s. “Don’t you understand? They took away our technology. We can’t create anything new. We’ve been living in the same landscapes, eating the same food, doing the same things for millennia.” Her exquisite face contorted into an expression of despair, and she shook her head. Her tone softening, she said, “Never mind. You can’t possibly comprehend.” She stood, composed her features and smoothed her robes. “I apologise for my outburst, my darling

Carrie. You've been an absolute treasure for not reporting my little holiday from Dandrobia, and here I am rewarding you with weeping and wailing." Turning her head to one side, she smiled. "Do you forgive me?" She put her hands together in a gesture of prayer and added, "Please say you do."

Looking at the beautiful alien, her long-lashed eyes wet with tears, it was hard to imagine her even being pushy, let alone terrorising entire civilisations. She seemed sweet and gentle, despite her size and strength. Dave was bossier than her, but he was no tyrant. Carrie's earlier misgivings about not informing on Apate began to fade. The alien seemed to deserve a little break from jail, though she still didn't understand why anyone would ever want to leave Dandrobia.

Watching Carrie's face carefully, Apate smiled. "You do forgive me, don't you? I can tell you do, my dear." She took a step forwards and stretched out her arms.

Carrie held up her hands, palms out, and shrank back, worried that Apate's gratefulness would prompt another hug. "Yes, yes, I forgive you."

"Oh, thank you." The alien sank gracefully onto the sofa, taking up much of the space, and draped an arm across the back. "This extra gravity makes me so weak." She tapped the cushion beside her, inviting Carrie to sit down. "Don't worry, my love. I'll go with you peacefully tomorrow morning when you return, and I'm sure that in the confusion no one will even know I've left."

"But..." Apate idly lifted a strand of Carrie's hair and brushed it back over her shoulder. "...if I am to return so soon, may I ask a very small, tiny favour?"

Carrie's eyes were held by Apate's—wide, deep and dazzling. "What's that?"

"It's only a small thing. Nothing at all really, my love. But would you mind if I went outside? I only want to see a little of your world before I return. Just so that I have some memories to sustain me for the next few thousand years. I hope I'm not asking too much."

Weeping had lent Apate's face a rosy blush, and her eyes were very bright. Carrie did not have the heart to refuse her.

## Chapter Nine – Down the Pub

AT THE PUB THAT NIGHT, she was careful to avoid Dave's open-mouthed gaze as she introduced Apaté to her colleagues as a friend from out of town. The men and women from the call centre, who were meeting for their traditional Saturday evening drink, ranged across several tables, their glasses of beer, wine and mixed spirits in hand.

As they turned to Apaté, their stares, along with those of the bar staff and all the other customers in the pub, became fixed on her. Carrie grimaced. Attracting attention to the alien was the last thing she wanted. She didn't know who else might know about dandrobians, and she couldn't afford the knowledge that one was on Earth getting back to Errruorerrrrrhch. Why had she agreed to bringing Apaté out with her? She shook her head. "What would you like to drink, Apaté?"

Carrie's male colleagues were hastily scooting along the pub benches and shifting chairs to make room for the statuesque beauty. Apaté's eyes were alive as she scanned the bar and the glasses of drinks. "Some of that," she said, pointing at a pint of beer. The men rose as one and fell over each other in their haste to get to the bar, arguing over whose shout it was. Dave slowly put down his drink and folded his arms as Carrie and the dandrobian manoeuvred between the tables.

Apaté settled herself in a vacant seat and smiled beatifically at the female call centre workers, who were eyeing her sullenly. Carrie had had some difficulty in finding a shop that sold clothes large enough to fit Apaté. All she had managed to come up with was a man's tracksuit, but even without makeup and with her hair barely arranged, the dandrobian still managed to look gorgeous. Carrie had put on a dress, which a rare event for her, but she might as well have been naked for all the benefit it gave her appearance next to Apaté.

Unable to decide among themselves who would buy the alien's beer, the men returned with three pints. No one had thought to buy a drink for Carrie, so she shrugged and helped herself to one of the pints, her discomfort fading a little into amusement while the men not-so-subtly fought to be the one who sat on the other side of the alien.

Dave's look was stern. He tried to catch Carrie's eye, but she ignored him.

The cover story Carrie had invented for Apaté seemed to be unneeded. Whenever anyone asked an awkward question about where she came from, or what she did or any other background details she couldn't answer, Apaté smiled and laughed, and her admirers laughed along with her. Even the women began to warm to her, asking about

how she did her hair and what skin routine she had and if she exercised.

Apate behaved with great charm and manners, and was perfectly at ease. She complimented the women on their clothes and looks and asked with seemingly genuine interest about their jobs at the call centre. And she laughed at all the men's stupid jokes.

For Carrie, the evening was also going quite well. Her anxiety about Apate being discovered melted considerably and would have gone entirely if it had not been for Dave. He remained in the corner, his lips set, and replied monosyllabically to any comments that came his way. Everyone but Carrie soon stopped paying any attention to him.

As time wore on, Carrie finally had to go to the toilet. By then she had no concerns about leaving Apate alone, but, as she had feared he would, Dave took the opportunity to talk to her in private. He cornered her in the passage leading from the bar.

"What the h—"

"It's one night," said Carrie. "I have to go back to Dandrobia in the morning, and I'm taking her with me. You should have seen her when I told her. She was so upset. Crying and everything. She's been trapped on that planet for thousands of years, and she just wanted to see a little bit of Earth, just a tiny bit, she said, before she went back. You can see how happy she is. Dave, she's so clever and charming, none of them suspect a thing. It won't do any harm. It won't. And after I take her back Errruorerrrrrh will never find out and I'll have done a nice thing for a good person. I mean, alien." Carrie took a breath.

Dave's expression had not changed during her speech. He leaned towards her and held up a finger. "One. If she's such a nice person, why has she persuaded you to commit a crime for her? Do you even know what happens to people who've done what you have? You might not only lose your job, you could end up in prison yourself. Did you think of that?" He held up another finger. "Two. What if she refuses to go back? She's built like a tank, Carrie. You might be a Bagua Zhang master, but you're not so good you're gonna force her to do anything she doesn't want to do." A third finger rose to join the others. "Three. What do you think the other dandrobians think about Apate being here? Do you suppose they don't want to leave Dandrobia too? What if they've noticed she's missing and they try to blackmail you? You're supposed to be neutral. Now they have the perfect hold over you so you have to do whatever they say."

Carrie's mouth opened and shut twice. She stomped a few steps down the passage, turned and stomped back. She held up a finger and pointed it at her friend as if in warning, then snatched it away, bit her

lip and clenched her fists at her sides. "Dammit, Dave, do you have to be right *all the time*?"

He leaned back against the wall, folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. "So, what are you going to do?"

Carrie shook her head. "I don't know. I can't seem to think straight when I'm around her. She's so gorgeous and charming. I don't even really know why I agreed to bring her here. What was I thinking?"

Dave frowned. "Well, she's here now. What's done is done. The question is, what are you going to do next?"

"Take her back home, I suppose." Carrie sighed. "Right away. Damage control." She set off towards the bar, but reversed her direction. "I have to go to the loo first." Pushing open the door to the ladies' room, she hurried inside.

Carrie looked at her reflection in the mirror as she washed her hands. She went back over the last twenty-four hours, wondering at her stupidity. *Of course* the dangers of not reporting Apate's escape were far worse than dealing with the repercussions of Errruorerrrrrhch's disappointment in her. The alien was a criminal. And yet... Her suspicion that the dandrobians were not as bad as the Unity made them out to be resurfaced. She also recalled Apate's tear-filled, sad face, and her heart softened again. Apate was such a lovely person, it was hard to say no to her. "Arghhh..." Carrie shook her head vigorously, banishing the dandrobian's face from her mind.

She would have to harden her resolve, tell Apate she had to come home with her right now, and hope that word about her temporary escape would never get out. It was going to be difficult to pry the dandrobian from her colleagues—the alien had made herself so popular—but it would have to be done.

But when she got back to the group, there was no sign of the dandrobian. Carrie spun on her heel, her eyes searching the bar, her heart rising in her throat. Apate was not there, and neither was Dave. Among her colleagues black looks were circulating, though a few were giggling.

"Looking for someone?" one of the women said, smirking.

"Oh, stop teasing her," said another. "You're friend left," she told Carrie.

"Left? Did she say where she was going?" Why would Apate leave without her? Had she wanted to go back to the flat? But she didn't have a key.

"No, and neither did Rob." The first woman laughed.

"She left with Rob?" A sinking feeling filled Carrie's stomach. She knew her colleague Rob well. A lovely photo of his wife and children sat on his desk.



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## Chapter Ten – Apate’s Excursion

FLINGING OPEN THE PUB door, Carrie sped out into the night. The women had told her Dave had also left, but when she looked up and down the street neither he nor Apate were anywhere to be seen. Picking a direction at random, she ran down the road, scanning from side to side for a sight of the alien. At her size, she should have been easy to spot, even in the weak lamplight, but Carrie saw no one resembling her among the late night pedestrians. She turned down another street, but there was still no sign of the escapee.

Then Carrie remembered Rob lived some distance from the pub and came by car. She stopped running and, panting, turned back the way she had come. There was no way she would catch up to Apate if she was in a car. The only place she knew of connected to Rob was his home, and that was the last place he would take the dandrobian. She went back to the pub for her coat and bag.

By the time she returned, Dave was also back and was waiting for her. The bar had called last orders a while before, and the other call centre workers were finishing their drinks and leaving.

“Your friend and Rob had left by the time I got back after talking to you. I went after them, but Rob’s car was gone.” He drained his pint. “What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know yet. Damn, damn, damn. Why oh why did I have to bring her out with me?”

Dave started putting on his coat. “She knows where you live, doesn’t she? Maybe she’ll come back later.”

Carrie’s pensive face brightened. “That’s an idea. Do you really think she might?”

“No.”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “Thanks.”

Dave spoke into her ear. “Seriously, why would she come back? You saw everyone here tonight. She had them wrapped round her finger in five minutes. It won’t take her more than a few days to set herself up, and though Northampton isn’t a patch on Dandrobia from the sound of it, at least she won’t be in prison.”

Cool blasts of air came through the door as Carrie and Dave’s work colleagues left. Carrie sat down and leaned on the table, her chin in her hand. “There’s no reason she should stick to Northampton. She’ll be off to London or, with her looks, Hollywood.” She sat up and her eyes widened. “Hey, you remember Belinda?”

Dave rubbed his knuckles. “She’s difficult to forget.”

“She said she was half-dandrobian. What if Hollywood actors have dandrobian blood, too?”

“How would that work, then? Oh never mind. I’ll leave you to figure it out. And how you’re going to find Apate and force her through the gateway tomorrow morning. I’m going home.”

Carrie scowled and watched her friend under beetled brows as he left. *Thanks for pointing out how much trouble I’m in then leaving me to deal with it.* Her shoulders slumped. But why should he help her clear up after her own mistakes? He had warned her. And where would the two of them look for Apate anyway? She could be in any shady hotel. Carrie squirmed and pushed the thought from her mind.

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ROGUE DIDN’T GIVE HIS usual happy bark when Carrie turned the key in the door of her flat after arriving home from the pub. She called his name as she closed the door. He ran out of the kitchen and stopped with his face pointed at the living room door, which was closed. He growled and barked a sharp, warning bark before looking expectantly at Carrie.

“You want to go in there? What for?”

Rogue ran to her, bounced and turned back to the door, where he continued growling.

Tension gripped Carrie. Was her dog trying to tell her someone was in the living room? Rogue was so friendly, she had never imagined he would be much use in protecting her home. But something was clearly wrong. She looked at her front door and examined its lock. Nothing seemed to have been forced. Should she phone the police? But she didn’t even know if she had an intruder. Did they respond to incidents of dogs behaving strangely?

She glanced about for a weapon. The nearest thing was an umbrella. She picked it up and held it out in front of her, before putting it down again. An umbrella as a weapon was ridiculous. A knife? She wasn’t comfortable using something that could easily be turned against her.

There was nothing for it. Carrie pushed her sleeves up to her elbows. She would just have to rely on her Bagua Zhang skills to fight off the intruder if there was one. Her heart thumping, she took two quick steps to the living room door and threw it open. Jumping into the room, she assumed a fighting stance.

“Hello, Carrie. Is something wrong?” asked Apate. She was sitting on Carrie’s sofa petting Toodles, who was curled in her lap. “I’m so glad you’re home, darling. Your other animal doesn’t like me. I daren’t leave the room.”

“Apate,” Carrie exclaimed. She straightened up and pulled down

her sleeves before clearing her throat. "I thought you might be a thief or something."

"Why would you think that?" Toodles shifted contentedly, and Apaté tickled her under her chin.

"Because...because..." Carrie tried to compose herself and lowered her voice as she continued, "you went off with Rob from Accounts. I didn't think you'd be back so soon, and maybe not ever."

"Oh, your lovely human friend only wanted to show me his car. It was new, you see, and he was sooo proud of it. I thought it would be terribly rude of me if I refused. He was such a darling. So sweet. He took me for short drive before dropping me back here."

"That's all you did?"

"Of course, my dear. Why, what were you imagining Rob and I did?" She looked at Carrie through lowered lashes. Toodles was purring.

"I—I wasn't sure." Carrie tutted. "There aren't many reasons two nearly complete strangers leave a pub together, Apaté."

A rich, resonant laugh broke from Apaté's throat. "Please forgive me, Carrie, darling. I'm just making a little joke. But there's no need for you to be concerned. Rob and I did nothing untoward. Why would we? He has a wife, and, as I said, I'm familiar with humans and their customs. I would never do such a thing." She lowered her eyelids once more. "How could you even suspect me?"

Stretching her long, shapely arms wide and yawning, Apaté tried to stand, but Toodles would not move from her lap. "I simply must go to bed, but your friendly animal doesn't seem to want to let me."

"She really likes you, doesn't she?" Carrie's brow wrinkled. She had always known that, deep down, Toodles was a gentle-hearted, adorable cat, but even she had to admit there were precious few instances where Toodles had justified her opinion.

Apaté scooped up the cat in both hands and placed her on the sofa. Free of her grasp, the cat shot away and up the bookshelves, where she snuggled into a gap between two sets of books.

"Good night," said Apaté.

"Good night." Carrie watched with relief as Apaté left the room. She went to where Toodles was curled. Her eyes were level with her cat's. Maybe Toodles had suddenly become more friendly? She reached out to pet her, but Toodles claws flashed out and she yowled. Carrie leapt back just in time to avoid the cat scratching her face. "Oh, Toodles," Carrie said sadly. What did Apaté have that she didn't—apart from stunning good looks and a perfect body? She got ready to spend a second night on the sofa.

## Chapter Eleven – Resistance Is Not Futile

CARRIE WAS NOT TAKING any chances with her stowaway the following morning when she was due to return to Dandrobia. She hastily ate her toast and drank her tea, and while Apaté was safely out of earshot in the bathroom, she called Dave and asked him to come over in case of any problems.

She liked Apaté. It was difficult not to like her, but there was much more to the dandrobian than appeared on the surface. When she had asked her how she had managed to get inside without a key, the alien only smiled sweetly and replied, “Ways and means, darling, ways and means.”

Dave was not happy about being woken up early on a Sunday morning, especially after a night at the pub, but he agreed to help. There was only a short window of time available to make sure Apaté came with her, and Carrie could not ask Erruorerrrrrhch to keep the gateway open any longer than normal without having to explain why. With Dave present there would be two of them to persuade the reluctant alien to leave before the gateway closed.

She clung to the hope that she could get Apaté back to Dandrobia without any problems. After she concluded the negotiations, Erruorerrrrrhch would be forced to admit she had done a reasonable job—the breakdown of the original meeting due to an unfortunate accident notwithstanding—and she could continue in her fascinating and fulfilling role with the Transgalactic Council.

Her doorbell sounded, and Rogue barked happily when she opened the door to Dave. The dog leapt up to lick his face. Toodles was in the bookshelf, where she went to sulk whenever she could not get Apaté’s attention.

“Get down, Rogue,” said Carrie.

The dog dropped obediently to the floor, his tail thumping noisily.

“Thanks for coming,” she said to Dave. “I’ve left some breakfast out on the table.”

“Good morning, Dave,” said Apaté, emerging from the bathroom. She was wearing her dandrobian clothing once more and she had wound the emerald-green material artfully around her body to show off its curves to their best advantage.

“Morning,” said Dave. “You’re off today, then?”

“Sadly, yes, though I’ll be sorry to leave. I’ll miss Earth sooo much. It’s *such* a wonderful place, with such marvellous things to eat and drink and interesting places to go.”

Carrie’s eyebrows rose. Last night’s dinner had been egg and chips, and she could hardly believe anyone would think Northampton and

her local pub was marvellous.

“Well, all good things must come to an end,” said Dave.

Apate sighed heavily. “How long do I have?”

Fighting the feeling of pity that surged up in her, Carrie pulled out her phone and checked it. “Fifteen minutes.”

Gathering her robes about her, Apate said, “I’d like to take one last look at Earth in the little time I have left, if I may.” She drifted theatrically past the two humans in the narrow hallway.

Rogue ran into the kitchen ahead of her, his low growl just audible. What was Rogue’s problem? Toodles liked Apate, and she did not seem to like anyone, not even Carrie, who had cared for her all her life.

They followed the alien and the dog, and found Apate poised at the kitchen sink, leaning slightly forward and gazing into the very ordinary street outside. Rogue was watching her intently, and he did not take his eyes off her when Carrie and Dave entered, though his tail thumped to acknowledge their presence.

Partly to fill the awkward silence and partly because she was genuinely curious, Carrie posed the question that was bothering her. “Apate, why do you like it here so much? I still don’t really understand. Earth has some beautiful places, but you haven’t seen them. You’ve only seen my boring flat and, well, nothing that I’d consider impressive. As far as I can tell Dandrobia is amazing. You made it that way, exactly how you like it. If there was any place in the galaxy where it’s possible to be completely content, Dandrobia’s it.”

Turning smoothly from the window and fixing Carrie with her wide, brown doe eyes, Apate replied, “Carrie, darling, it’s very simple. Once I could travel to any place in the galaxy my heart desired. I had only to book passage on a starship. All of that changed when the Unity objected to our rule and confined us to our home world. For the last several millenia all I’ve known is Dandrobia, and it isn’t enough. Earth is *different*.” She returned to looking out of the window. Her hands rose to her face and her shoulders began to shake.

Neither Carrie nor Dave knew what to say. After a few moments the alien spun round, trailing an arm dramatically. “But I mustn’t burden you with my troubles, my dearest Carrie. None of them are your fault, and they are not within your power to resolve. I must bear them bravely. No doubt they are thoroughly deserved.”

Finding herself wondering just what the dandrobians had done that was so bad, Carrie pulled herself up sharply and shook her head. Being around Apate was like being tipsy. She could not quite think straight. She grimaced at Dave, who rolled his eyes. “Rogue,” she exclaimed. The dog had lifted his lips, bearing his teeth.

Apate looked at Carrie’s pet with alarm and edged away from him.

“We engineered all animal species on Dandrobia to be harmless. Your Earth animal is rather frightening.”

“Rogue!” The dog settled down but his eyes remained on the dandrobian. Carrie shook her head and tutted. Looking at her kitchen clock, she saw she had five minutes until Errruorerrrrrhch opened the transgalactic gateway. She picked up her Transgalactic Council Officer’s toolbox and slung it over her shoulder.

Seeing Carrie’s action, Apate said, “I don’t suppose there’s the teensiest chance I could stay *just* a little longer?”

Carrie opened her mouth.

“No, there isn’t,” Dave said.

Apate glanced at Dave and took a beat too long to reply, though her sweet, pleading expression remained the same. “Of course not. It was very wrong of me to ask.”

“You’ll need to move out of the way,” said Carrie. “The gateway’s going to open just where you’re standing.”

“Oh, is it?” She looked down. “Here?”

“Yes, there,” said Carrie. It was odd that Apate didn’t remember where she had come through from Dandrobia the evening before last. Or maybe she did remember. Carrie tightened her grip on her bag. She looked at Dave. He gave her a barely perceptible nod. Apate stepped away from the cupboard and into a corner. As the minute hand on the clock reached twelve, the cupboard door began to glow green.

“Here it comes,” said Carrie. “Get ready. You go through first, and I’ll follow.”

Apate did not reply.

The door flew open, revealing the swirling green mist. She gestured to Apate, indicating to the dandrobian it was time for her to step up. But the alien remained where she was, her back against the kitchen wall, her lips set.

“Apate,” said Carrie.

Her arms folded in front of her, Apate closed her eyes. She gave a slight shake of her head.

“Apate,” exclaimed Carrie. There were only moments until the door would close and she would have to explain to Errruorerrrrrhch why she had not gone through.

Once more the alien shook her head. She took a step towards the kitchen door, and Carrie darted across to grab her. She managed to get her arms around Apate’s waist, but the dandrobian was large and strong. Though Carrie stopped her from leaving the kitchen, she successfully resisted her attempts to drag her over to the gateway. Dave joined Carrie, gripping the alien’s arms, and Rogue also joined in the fray, barking and leaping around the struggling figures.

The two humans and one alien wrestled. Carrie slipped a foot

behind Apate's knee and managed to unbalance her so that, together, she and Dave succeeded in moving her nearer the green mist. Its attractive force tugged at Carrie's hair.

"Apate, you have to leave with me, now," said Carrie between her teeth.

"I can't go back there," exclaimed Apate. "I won't."

"Yes you bloody well will," said Dave.

"Rogue," shouted Carrie. The dog was dangerously close to the cupboard and the pull of the gateway. The door began to swing closed. Carrie leapt and grabbed Apate round her neck and waist, trying to twist the alien towards the open cupboard. She bent down, then with a great heave she rose again, throwing off Carrie and knocking Dave flying. He sailed across the kitchen and crashed into the table, scattering breakfast cereal and milk over the floor. Carrie flew in the opposite direction and into the mist.

As she was sucked under her sink, Carrie heard a dog's yelp and felt a familiar hairy body. Apate was not coming with her to Dandrobia, but Rogue was.



## Chapter Twelve – Double Trouble

ROGUE AND THE FAMILIAR cushions made a soft but slightly smelly landing for Carrie when the green mist deposited her once more in the receiving hall on Dandrobia. After leaping out from under her, Rogue ran through the legs of the waiting dandrobians to the corner of the room, where he sat with his tail between his legs.

Carrie staggered upright and turned to the gateway, which was fading quickly. She was not surprised when Apate didn't appear. The last glow petered out, and she turned to the aliens standing about in their jewel-coloured robes, surveying them with new, distrustful eyes. She was beginning to understand through Apate's behaviour that there were depths to this species she had not penetrated. Her expectation that they would be controlling and aggressive had misled her. Dandrobian methods were subtle. Their history of taking over the galaxy suddenly made a lot more sense.

"Welcome back, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett," said a male dandrobian with shoulder-length chestnut hair and amber eyes. He was tall even for one of his species, 240 or 250 centimetres, Carrie estimated. His fellows were distractedly and anxiously glancing at Rogue.

"Thank you," said Carrie, straightening her jumpsuit. "I'm sorry about my dog. He got drawn into the gateway because..." She paused. Had they noticed Apate was missing and guessed where she had gone? "He was startled and jumped through by accident."

"Oh, an Earth animal isn't a problem, dear. Don't worry about it," said a curly-haired female dandrobian, though she did not take her eyes off the panting Rogue. "We'll...er...look after him for you."

"No, no, that's fine. There's no need. He'll stay by me. Here, Rogue, come here." The dog trotted to Carrie's side, travelling in a wide circle to avoid the dandrobians, who backed away as he approached. He sat at Carrie's feet.

"Thank goodness you're back," said another male. Putting his hands together in supplication, continued, "You must help us. What the squashpumps have done is simply dreadful. Please make them leave. It's only the beginning of the persecution, we're sure of it. We need protection, or to be allowed to escape to another world."

"This is not the appropriate time, brother," said the chestnut-haired dandrobian. He turned to Carrie and smiled. "My name is Notos. I'll escort you to your retiring room."

Notos? Like Apate, the name was familiar to Carrie. "No, thanks, I don't need to rest. If the squashpumps have calmed down let's move straight on to the meeting." She wanted to get back and sort out the

problem with the escaped dandrobian as soon as possible. Though the alien and Dave were effectively frozen in time while she was away, the situation was worrying. She wasn't sure how she was going to explain to Errruorerrrrrhch why she needed another gateway to Dandrobia when her mission was complete—she supposed she would just have to confess what had happened—but until then she had a job to do here, and if she did it well, perhaps her manager wouldn't think too badly of her.

"Whatever you say, darling," said Notos. "We're all keen to have this over with so those awful squashpumps go home, aren't we?" He turned to the others for confirmation, and his fellows nodded and murmured in agreement.

Rogue trotting obediently at Carrie's side, they walked out onto the mossy, springy green sward. As they left the complex of buildings, however, they took a different direction from the one they had followed before.

"Aren't we going back to the meeting platform?" Carrie asked Notos.

"Oh no, it's much too windy there. We can't risk another unfortunate accident." He rolled his eyes and smiled. "We're holding the meeting indoors this time. There's a hall adjoining the library that's large enough."

"The library?" Carrie remembered the building from her last visit. She loved libraries. Maybe she could take a peek inside this one before she returned to Earth.

They approached the building and passed through a wide doorway into a large, brightly coloured room, filled by an oval table surrounded by chairs. Sunlight poured through high, open windows. At one end of the room was a closed door. The squashpumps had, as before, arrived early, and they were sitting around the edge of the table. Many had already reared up and sprouted tentacles, rainbow hues pulsating across them.

As she neared the squashpumps, her translator caught and transmitted their Scottish-accented voices. They were squabbling about something but she could not quite make it out. Their tentacles were waving in agitation.

"I'm the Foreign Secretary," said one voice, louder than the rest.

"No, I am," said another.

"No, it's me," said the first voice.

"The original should retain the position, it's the law," piped up another squashpump.

"Which one of you is it?"

"It's me of course."

"No it isn't. I'm the original."

Carrie sat down at the table and placed her bag on it. Notos sat beside her and leaned in conspiratorially. "Don't mind them, my dear. They'll sort themselves out in a minute."

"What's the problem?" Carrie asked in a low tone. "Have they sent two new Foreign Secretaries by mistake?"

"New ones? Oh no. That's the one you met." He pointed at a squashpump that, to Carrie's eyes, was indistinguishable from the rest. "Or that one is." He pointed to another and smirked. "Actually, I'm not sure myself."

Carrie's eyes grew wide. "But...?"

Notos chuckled. "You thought the old one was dead? No, no, no." He shook his head, smiling. "No, when you cut one in half, they grow into two new individuals." He put his hand to his mouth and whispered, "Makes them damned difficult to conquer, let me tell you." He winked and leaned back. "But don't worry, those days are over. Anyway, the regenerated head end is supposed to be the original. But the tail end usually has a go at usurping the position."

The arguing squashpumps began inching across the table towards one another.

"What are we going to do?" asked Carrie. "We can't hold a meeting with two Foreign Secretaries, especially if they keep squabbling."

Rogue put his paws up on the table and watched the squashpumps eagerly, his nose snuffling and his tail wagging. The dandrobians eyed him and edged away.

"Don't worry, my love," said Notos. "They'll resolve the problem eventually. They always do."

The assembled dandrobians were chatting amongst themselves, like Notos, seemingly unfazed by the Foreign Secretaries' disagreement. Around the table edge, the stalks on squashpump heads were drawing in and the colourful shades were fading to grey. The Scottish voices lapsed into silence.

Carrie wondered if the Foreign Secretaries were going to fight it out. But how would they do that? When they had attacked the dandrobians, they had squeezed themselves into the aliens' orifices and taken up residence in their brains. Squashpumps didn't seem to have any noses or ears or eyes. There was just one hole among the stalks, which she thought was probably a mouth.

One of the approaching Foreign Secretaries bunched its body up into a low mound of folds, preparing to spring. Carrie held her breath. The other Foreign Secretary was not slow to respond. It also halted and squashed its body into a flat, thick cylinder.

*It's a little bit like tiddlywinks,* Carrie thought.

The dandrobian conversation stuttered to complete silence. All eyes were on the adversaries now. Rogue gave an excited bark, his

tongue lolling. As if the bark were a starting pistol, the Foreign Secretaries sprang simultaneously into the air and flew in neat parabolas towards each other. Whatever happened next took place too quickly for Carrie to see, but the result was that only one very fat squashpump fell with a squelch to the table.

The silence continued as the remaining Foreign Secretary composed itself before gliding slowly back to the table edge. For some reason, Carrie wanted to applaud, but the other squashpumps made no sound. With a start, she realised everyone was watching her, waiting for her to speak. She cleared her throat.

## Chapter Thirteen – Rogue in Disgrace

CARRIE WASN'T GOOD at meetings but she did her best. Trying her hardest to concentrate, she affected a facial expression that she hoped radiated an intelligent, contemplative interest in the conversation. In truth, her eyes were often on the closed door, wondering if the library was behind it, or on the door to the outside, which had been left open. The rolling, flowery hillsides shining in pink-tinged sunlight seemed to call to her.

The points of agreement the dandrobians and squashpumps had achieved before the unfortunate accident with the Foreign Secretary were not much altered. The wording of the formal apology that the dandrobian representative was to state at the next Unity convention had been decided long ago. Neither side proposed a change to the statement, and the meeting moved smoothly on to the matter of the infected dandrobians. After some debate, the squashpumps agreed that as soon as reparations for invasion and occupation were received from the dandrobians, all squashpumps would withdraw from dandrobian brains.

They moved on to the final point, the amount of reparations. Carrie had hoped this would be a formality, but the squashpumps had a different idea.

"We propose an increase of 0.5 percent in consideration of the harm caused to my person at the previous meeting," said the new (or old) Foreign Secretary.

"Half a percent?" a willowy female dandrobian drawled. "Honestly, darling, you can't be serious. It was an accident. It was a little puff of wind that sent your column toppling. How could we be to blame for that?" She spread her arms wide.

"It's out of the question, dearie," said a moustachioed dandrobian. "We can barely afford the reparations as it is. In fact, the truth is we can't afford them. You squashpumps don't seem to understand. We don't have any technology, and we aren't allowed to trade with anyone else. We're really very poor now, you know. We've had to pay back so much over the years."

Dandrobian heads around the table nodded. "Hmm, yes, can't afford it," they murmured.

"Och, stop exaggerating," said the Foreign Secretary. "My people were terrorised, enslaved and imprisoned. D'ye no mind that?"

"Oh, of course we do, my love. And we're very very sorry, aren't we everyone?" asked the willowy dandrobian.

Her fellows nodded again vigorously. "So sorry," they said. "We really, truly are."

“But we can’t give you what we don’t have,” added the dandrobian with the moustache.

The Foreign Secretary tsked.

“And it was only a little tumble,” added Notos from Carrie’s side. “You seem very well now. You look wonderful, in fact.” He smiled brilliantly at the Foreign Secretary, who seemed to swell a little with the compliment.

But the other squashpumps were not swayed. “Half a percent, half a percent,” they chorused, their tentacles waving in agitation.

The dandrobians sighed, rolled their eyes and pulled faces. “But we don’t have it,” they said, and, “It’ll be very difficult for us as it is,” and “We’d love to say yes, wouldn’t we, dears? But it simply isn’t possible.”

Carrie’s ability to pay attention to this apparently endless back and forth about an extra half a per cent waned quickly. Rogue had fallen asleep. She fought down a yawn and waved a hand for some silence. “What about a quarter per cent, or an eighth?”

The squashpumps were having none of it. The ‘half a per cent’ chant grew louder as more squashpumps joined in, the shrill voices echoing in Carrie’s head. She put her hands over her ears, but it made no difference to the volume because the translator was broadcasting in her mind.

She was wondering what to do to regain some control when a silence fell. The squashpumps turned to the open doorway. A horse was standing there, its head peering around the door frame. Carrie’s breath caught in her throat. The horse was milky white, with a long, soft mane and brilliant blue eyes. It was the most beautiful animal she had ever seen.

“Oh for goodness sake,” said a dandrobian. He went to the horse and shooed it. “Go away you silly beast.” The horse lifted its head and snorted before turning away and disappearing. The thud of its hooves on the turf grew fainter as it departed.

Carrie turned amazed eyes to Notos. “Wow, that—”

“Half a percent,” squealed a squashpump.

Notos whispered in her ear, “Maybe you should suggest a break?”

“But...” Carrie’s mind was lingering on the horse, and it took her a moment to understand what Notos was talking about. “Oh, of course.” She stood up. “Let’s have a short recess while we collect our thoughts.” The dandrobians began to file out of the room, and the squashpumps inched down the table legs. “Please stay in the vicinity so you can be called when the meeting reconvenes.”

As the aliens left Carrie remained in her seat, unwilling to disturb the sleeping Rogue, who was lying across her feet. She wondered if she should contact Errruorerrrrrhch for advice about dealing with the

impasse, but that would be admitting defeat. She wanted to succeed at this alone. All she had to do was to persuade the squashpumps to drop their demand or convince the dandrobians to agree to it. Half a per cent extra reparations did seem excessive, considering that it was an accident and the Foreign Secretary was no worse for his experience.

“A penny for your thoughts?” asked Notos, who had remained behind with her.

“That’s very good English,” Carrie said, wondering if he even knew what a penny was.

“Oh I love all those English sayings. Bottoms up; it never rains but it pours; how’s your father?” He winked.

“So, do you get lots of English-speaking visitors? Are there any here now?” Carrie wondered if she might bump into the Prime Minister or the President of the U.S.

“We do get quite a few, but not here. Mostly they go to slightly warmer zones, where it’s prettier.”

“This place is lovely.”

“Hmm, it isn’t bad, but in the tourist areas there are mountains, lakes, beaches etcetera.”

“Oh yes, I saw them in my briefing. So is this a government area?”

“It is governmental, but there’s little call for government on Dandrobia. We mostly do our own thing. This place is largely administrative, but partly historical. Would you like me to show you around?”

“That’d be great. I’d actually love to have a look in the library.”

Notos looked uncomfortable. “I’m very sorry, it’s locked at the moment. Perhaps you’d rather see something else?”

“You lock it up? Why?” Carrie carefully eased her feet out from under Rogue, but woke him up nonetheless.

Notos hesitated, then smiled apologetically. “You know, I really don’t know, my dear. But I can show you the outside. It is one of our more beautiful buildings.”

As they left the meeting room, Rogue followed. Notos led Carrie around the other side of the hill to show her the library. As she gazed at the low, gaily coloured, well-proportioned structure, set against a beautiful view of bright blue sky, she again had the feeling it reminded her of something. “It looks great. Perfect, somehow,” she said. “Is it very old?”

“No, it was built about three thousand Earth years ago.”

“That’s pretty old,” exclaimed Carrie.

Notos nodded. “Yes, I suppose it is to you. It was one of the first buildings to be constructed after the Unity confined us here. When our technology was destroyed or confiscated, we wanted somewhere to record as much of our history as we could before the data files were

destroyed. So we built the library first.”

“It’s lovely.”

Rogue seemed to like it, too. He ran up the hill to the building and began sniffing around its base. For a moment Carrie was too lost in her contemplation of the picturesque scene to register what her pet was doing, or what he was about to do. When the realisation struck her, her hand flew to her mouth. “Rogue, Rogue, come here boy,” she called. The dog was working his way along the building to a corner. “Rogue,” shouted Carrie, and began to run up the hill. “Rogue, no, don’t—” She was too late. Rogue lifted his leg and an arc of urine flowed out and down the wall.

Notos was striding up behind Carrie. She turned to see his expression, expecting a strong reaction to this desecration of one of Dandrobia’s most important buildings, but the alien only looked puzzled.

“Is your dog...?”

“Yes, he is.” Carrie smiled brightly. “On Earth, it’s a sign of great admiration.”

Notos’ eyebrows lifted. “Well, we are quite proud of our library. It is a wonderful building. I am amazed your animal recognizes its beauty.”

“Oh, yes, he loves it.”



## Chapter Fourteen – Inside the Dandrobian Mind

DESPITE THE RECESS, when the meeting resumed the squashpumps had not moved an inch on their insistence on half a per cent extra in reparations. They refused to relent, and it seemed to Carrie that even they were bored with the stalemate, or some other emotion that she could not quite put her finger on. The slug-like creatures were very hard to read, and there had never seemed to be an opportunity for her to get to know them better.

For their part, the dandrobians refused to agree to the increase in the nicest, most polite manner possible.

The endless, repetitive back and forth wore Carrie's patience tissue-thin. Her facial muscles ached from being fixed in a rigor of engagement and interest for hours as the discussion went round and round. The dandrobians produced long verbal accounts about their planetary economy, and the squashpumps displayed holographic estimations of how wealthy they would have become if the dandrobians had not invaded, and the monetary loss due to the damage to the Foreign Secretary's public image from his embarrassing accident.

Meanwhile, the problem of Apace being on Earth grew and grew in Carrie's mind. Though the dandrobian would not have time to cause any mischief, she still had no plan for getting her home. And, she realised during her musings, confessing to Errruorerrrrrhch was not a solution either, because she still had no idea how to get Apace through a gateway. Forcing the large alien through a small cupboard door was not going to be easy.

As the sun began to lower to the horizon, Carrie had to admit defeat, for the time being at least. Errruorerrrrrhch must have been listening in because, after she wrapped everything up, her manager's voice sounded through her translator. She was not pleased. "You appear to be having some difficulty in drawing these negotiations to a close."

"Yes, it's been difficult, but it's all because of that silly accident. If only it hadn't happened. Everything would be over by now."

"I am aware of the point of contention, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett."

Carrie sighed.

"You must continue the talks in the morning. There is no alternative."

"You mean I have to stay here? But I don't even have my toothbrush." A silence from Errruorerrrrrhch followed her remark.

“But of course I’ll stay if I must.”

“You must. We have no experienced officers to assist you at the moment. The crisis regarding the placktoids, is proving troublesome and time-consuming. Speak with both sides informally before reconvening the meeting tomorrow. Perhaps through a more casual conversation you can persuade either the squashpumps or the dandrobians to relent on this final point.”

“I will. But I need more information. Is it true what both of them are saying? Do the dandrobians really have no more to give, and will the squashpumps suffer more economic damage from the Foreign Secretary’s loss of face?”

“Neither statement is possible to verify with any certainty. All these matters are subject to interpretation. The dandrobians’ planetary wealth is particularly difficult to ascertain. The Unity perhaps made a mistake when it insisted their technology return to a pre-industrial state. Now there is no central database to provide figures or other information on exactly what is happening in Dandrobia’s economy. It is also a peculiar situation because the dandrobians long ago genetically engineered the organisms in their environment to provide for their needs with very little effort on their part. Food, drink, clothes, shelter, these are all easily obtainable from the plants and animals around. So when the dandrobians say their economy is poor, it is true. They have little to give away, yet they lack nothing.”

*It really is a paradise*, thought Carrie. Her interest in the planet reawakened, and she felt better about staying longer, even without her toothbrush. They must have a toothbrush plant or something, she concluded. “Okay, I’ll talk to them and see if I can get one or the other side to give way.” She turned off the translator. As she left the meeting room, she met Notos waiting outside. “I have to stay the night.”

“I thought you might. You can stay in the retiring room. But it’s still early. Would you like to come to a small gathering of friends we’re having this evening? Do say you will.” He grinned.

Carrie’s day had been very long and trying. A small, relaxing party was just what she needed. “I’d love to.” Erruorerrrrrhch had told her to speak with the dandrobians informally, after all. She could speak to the squashpumps in the morning.

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AFTER SETTling ROGUE in the retiring room with lots of pats and promises to return soon, Carrie joined the dandrobians at their soirée. It was in a small room. As dusk turned to darkness the aliens lit tall,

thin dried plants set in sconces around the walls. The plants burned with a bright, smokeless flame.

She took a sip of the drink a dandrobian pressed into her hand as she arrived. It tasted almost the same as the stuff from the tap in the retiring room, but it gave her an immediate buzz. She relaxed into a seat beside Notos, wishing she had something different to wear other than her too-tight Transgalactic Officer uniform.

After she took another sip, Notos said, "You can relax and enjoy yourself tonight. We're all friends here." He poured himself a drink. "Tell me about Earth. What's the geography like? And the climate? What do humans do for fun?"

Carrie didn't think that Earth would compare well to Dandrobia, but she talked about it nonetheless. She described the different landscapes, the animals, the people, the cities, art, culture and history of various nations. As she spoke to Notos, the conversations around her slowly dried up, until eventually the room became silent except for her voice.

When her speech dried up, it was not because she had run out of things to say. Carrie realised she could talk about life on Earth for a very long time. She stopped speaking because of the expressions on the faces of the dandrobians. The mild, convivial expressions had fallen away and been replaced with sadness, wonder, envy, anger and deep, deep longing.

A female dandrobian stood, her face contorted into a beautiful, terrible rage, her hands clenched into tight fists. "Oh, how long must we go on?" she exclaimed. "Day after day the same. Nothing ever changing. Never seeing, never doing anything new. How much longer do we have to bear it? Haven't we been punished enough? Why oh why won't they set us free?"

## Chapter Fifteen – The Penny Drops

CARRIE WOKE EARLY IN the retiring room the next day, surprised at how well she felt. She had drunk plenty of the dandrobians' intoxicating beverage the previous evening and had fallen into bed very relaxed, happy and dizzy. But there seemed to be no after effects from her self-indulgence. In fact, she felt very refreshed and was buzzing with energy and life.

Rogue was sniffing with interest at the gap under the door and pawing at the floor. With guilt Carrie remembered he had not been out since the previous evening as she had forgotten to walk him when she got home from the party.

After pulling on her jacket and shoes and tucking the translator into her pocket, she went outside with her dog. She hoped to find where the squashpumps were staying so that she could discuss the half a per cent problem. She had unfortunately forgotten to ask the dandrobians their guests' location the previous evening.

The sky was a pre-dawn grey shot through with opalescence, and the mossy sward glimmered with dew in the early morning light. Cool air refreshed her skin. All was quiet in the complex. Carrie imagined the dandrobians rose late, in keeping with their idyllic and yet apparently unbearably boring lifestyle.

She scanned the ground. Squashpumps would love the damp grass and the cool morning air, she speculated, but there was no sign of the alien visitors. She scouted around the complex for half an hour, but no squashpumps were to be found. She seemed to be alone with Rogue. Giving up on the idea of speaking with the squashpumps for the moment, she called her dog to follow and set off in the direction of the outdoor meeting platform that overlooked the ocean, hoping to find a way down to the shore. Rogue loved playing in the sea.

As she walked, the sun appeared at the horizon, its rays shining red and violet. Carrie wondered if the colours were due to the star's great age. How long had the dandrobians lived on their planet if, as Notos had said, three thousand Earth years was a short time to them? For all their bad behaviour, the aliens at least had preserved some of their planet's natural beauty.

The sun rose swiftly as she strolled the rolling hills. Wildflower blooms opened as light and warmth increased, the hillside transforming into a riot of gentle hues like a Monet painting. Carrie slowed to a stop, and for a short while she could only stand in awe.

Rogue was less impressed. He disappeared over a hill and out of Carrie's sight, and she walked faster to catch him. She began to jog, enjoying the exercise, though her jumpsuit restricted her movement

uncomfortably. Reaching the top of the hill, the sea spread out in front of her, a deep blue-green. The long grass and wildflowers became sparse and faded into sand down the lower hill slope. She skittered down along the path of Rogue's paw prints. He was already in the waves, chasing and splashing in them.

Carrie rolled up her jumpsuit legs to her knees and waded in after her dog. He rushed over and showered her thoroughly in sea water until her clothes were so wet there seemed to be little point to wearing them. She waded back to shore, and after a long look around the hills and shoreline for dandrobians, and out to sea in case of boats, she unzipped and pulled off the jumpsuit. With another look around her she also took off her underwear. Skinny dipping was a pleasure she rarely got a chance to enjoy.

The feeling of being free of her too-tight uniform was wonderful. Carrie ran into the waves and swam a little way from the shore. The water was just cool enough to feel tingly and fresh without chilling her. She swam farther out, then relaxed and floated on her back, watching the brightening sky and listening to Rogue's excited panting and splashing from afar.

*Who would want to leave a place like this?* What could be better than spending the rest of her days walking the hills and skinny dipping in the just-warm sea? She recalled the female dandrobian's hysterical outburst the previous evening. Maybe it had been out of the ordinary? But she could not forget the hungry look the other aliens had when she had spoken about Earth. Despite the warmth of the water, she shivered.

Something prodded at Carrie's fingers. Her heart leaped and she snatched her hand out of the water. Raising her head to look into the depths, she saw a school of fishlike creatures surrounding her. Fifteen to twenty centimetres long, they shimmered silver as they swam and turned, swam and turned as one.

Her stomach tightening, she turned onto her front and looked towards the shore. She had drifted out farther than she had intended. As a strong swimmer this did not bother her too much, but she didn't want Rogue to swim out to her. She began to return to land, but she had not taken more than a few strokes when something rose from the depths directly beneath her. The wide, soft back of a sea creature lifted her slightly out of the water.

Carrie gave a little scream. She slipped off the strange animal, plunging into the sea, her head dipping for a moment below the surface. The animal that had swum underneath her was a little like a dolphin, but wider and blue-green like the sea, so that it seemed to melt into the waves. As she watched, it swam beneath her again, and rose, lifting her once more. Carrie's heart began to slow. If the

creature had wanted to attack her it would have. She got the impression that instead it was trying to help her. Relaxing, she let it raise her on its back again.

To prevent herself from falling off, she lightly gripped the dorsal fin and gave a chuckle of delight as the creature began swimming towards the shore, carrying her with it. Waves splashed against her grinning face as they approached the beach. A doggy-paddling Rogue met them midway. Very interested in the creature conveying Carrie, he tried to sniff it but only succeeding in huffing seawater, which made him choke and cough.

Blinking the water out of her eyes, she saw a figure appear over the hill's brow, and her joy evaporated. Even at the distance she recognised Notos, probably coming to find her. She was suddenly acutely aware she was naked. She was not generally very shy about nudity, but that familiar feeling of being short and chubby that always occurred when she was around the dandrobians had returned.

It must have been obvious to Notos she was naked because her bright orange jumpsuit was the single most visible item in the landscape, but this did not seem to faze the dandrobian, who stood at the water's edge awaiting her. She was just going to have to brave it out.

She waved as she rose from the water. "Hello, good morning, Notos."

"Good morning. I've brought you something to wear." He held out a ruby-red length of material as she approached.

"Thanks." Carrie took it and wrapped it immediately around herself, her wet skin soaking the cloth. "That was kind of you."

"I thought you'd be more comfortable in dandrobian clothes. Your Transgalactic Council Officer's uniform looked much too tight."

"Thanks," said Carrie once more, through her teeth.

Notos was right. The dandrobian material was very comfortable. It was incredibly soft and warm, and it wicked the moisture away from her skin so that it dried quickly. But as Carrie tried to fix the material more securely she couldn't figure out how to drape it so that it wasn't in danger of slipping off and revealing to the world exactly why her jumpsuit was too tight.

"Can I help you?" asked Notos.

"No, no, I'm fine." She was looping the fabric first one way and then another, at the same time trying to avoid exposing herself to Notos, though she had no idea why—he had already seen everything there was to see.

"Notos," she said as she struggled with the fabric. "Could I have one of those brooches you use to pin your robes?"

The alien placed a hand over the golden clasp at his shoulder. "I'm

very sorry. These are only permitted to dandrobians. But it shouldn't be too difficult to tie the robe in place."

"Oh, okay." She shrugged, and eyed the jewellery as Notos removed his hand. A shell-like, whorled piece, there did not seem anything special about it, but maybe it had some cultural significance.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some help with that, my dear?" asked the dandrobian as Carrie tied a large knot under her chin.

"I think I've got the hang of it now." She tied another large knot between her legs. "That'll do. Shall we go back to the others?"

Rogue was already dashing up the hill, panting, wet and sandy after his play at the beach. Carrie and Notos climbed after the excited dog, Carrie's happy mood dissipating at the thought of the day ahead. She still had no idea how she was going to move the squashpumps and dandrobians on from their stalemate.

But as she reached the top of the slope, all thoughts were driven from her mind and her knees became weak. At a distance, heading towards them, was the white horse that had stuck its head in the door at the meeting the previous day. Only it was not a horse, for what had been invisible to her before was that on its back were long, feathery, brilliantly white wings.

Carrie gripped Notos' arm and pointed at the creature, her mouth unable to form words. It was not only the sight of the animal that moved her. Pieces of the puzzle of Dandrobia—the familiarity of the buildings, the dandrobian names and their history and the aliens themselves—were slotting into place in her mind like the levers of a lock closing. Finally, it all made sense. Earth had been one of the worlds the dandrobians had colonised, thousands of years ago. Greek mythology told of them. Apate and Notos, their names were familiar because they were minor gods of Ancient Greece. The stories told of the gods' marvellous deeds, and how they had bred with humans and animals, giving rise to strange creatures. But when they died they became stars. They *went* to the stars.

"Are you all right, darling?" asked Notos.

"P—P—P..." Carrie made an effort and spat the word out.

"Pegasus. It's Pegasus!"

## Chapter Sixteen – Carrie’s Mistake

“WELL, IT’S a pegasus, yes. You’ve done your research. Well done. Complete pains in the bottom, they are, to be honest.”

Carrie swallowed and shook her head. “Wh-what?”

“Oh, they’re always following us around, wanting someone to ride them. We keep chasing them off but give them a couple of days and they’re back again. They can’t help it, you see. That’s how they were engineered. To be in a constant state of eagerness to be ridden. They’d be too damned difficult to catch otherwise. But once you’ve been on a pegasus several thousand times the novelty wears off.” He sighed.

“You can ride them?” Carrie squeaked.

“Of course you can ride them. That’s what they’re *for*.” Notos rolled his eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m being rude. You can certainly ride them, but you have to hold on tight. We’ve lost quite a few fellow dandrobians that way over the years.”

“I—I could ride one...now?” The pegasus trotted up and began nuzzling Carrie’s cheek.

“Go away,” said Notos, flapping his hands.

“Please don’t shoo him.” Carrie stroked the animal’s velvety nose.

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t ride one if you like, but I don’t think you have time, darling, before the meeting.”

Carrie’s mind, which was already soaring amongst the clouds on the back of a beautiful white-winged stallion, came down to earth with a bump. The meeting. “Oh, yes.” She heaved a massive sigh. “Maybe I’ll have time after.” She would have time. She would make time. Bending down, she pulled up a handful of grass and wildflowers. She fed them to the pegasus, and it chomped them down and nuzzled her for more.

“If you carry on doing that it’ll never leave you alone,” said Notos.

He began walking back to the complex, and Carrie slowly followed, dragging her feet. The pegasus came with her, blowing through its nostrils into her face to show it wanted to be fed. She ran her hands through its silky mane.

Notos slowed his pace so that he was walking alongside her. As the three of them crossed the hills he explained more of the wonders of Dandrobia. The apparently wild, natural landscape they were walking through was entirely engineered, he said. He explained there was not an inch of Dandrobia that had not been manipulated to meet the dandrobians’ material and aesthetic desires.

“The *whole* planet?” exclaimed Carrie. “I’d heard you’d fixed everything to be exactly as you wanted it. But an entire world? That’s an enormous feat. I almost can’t believe it. It would take forever.”



“Don’t forget we’re an ancient species, my love. As far as anyone knows we’re the oldest intelligent species in the galaxy. Our years on Dandrobia number in the hundreds of millions.”

Carrie looked Notos up and down and shook her head. “I don’t understand it. I would have thought dandrobians would have evolved into energy, or light or something like that by now.”

“I’m very old in your terms, my dear, but even I’m not old enough to know or remember why we didn’t do that. I do know we have no desire to now. We’re physical beings, the same as you. We enjoy physical pleasures as well as intellectual ones. Why would we want to give those up? We are already immortal.”

Immortal. The immortal gods of Ancient Greece. And here she was walking beside one. She tried to remember which god Notos was, and Apate. But she was no expert. The names were just two of the many odd pieces of generally useless information she had picked up in her years of doing pub quizzes. She wondered what had happened to Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite, Poseidon and all the others. Recalling the god of the sea reminded her of her swim. “There was something in the water that carried me to shore, Notos. Do you know what it was?”

“It was a miliot. They were designed to help dandrobians who swim beyond their depth in the ocean. It must have thought you were one of us.”

“It saves people from drowning? That’s amazing.”

Notos smiled. “Did fish also approach you while you were out?”

“Yes, a whole school of them were swimming around me.”

“We engineered those, too, to offer themselves up as food.”

Carrie’s eyes grew wide, but then she gave a look of disgust. “That’s terrible.”

The dandrobian shrugged. “We aren’t forced to kill other creatures or damage the ocean habitat to catch them.”

Carrie’s mind spun with questions. She had to know more about this amazing species and find out about the time they had spent on Earth. “Notos, I’d love it if I could spend some time in the library. Dandrobia’s history sounds fascinating.”

A flicker of tension crossed the alien’s face, quickly smoothed away by a smile. “I don’t believe our written language would be comprehensible to you, I’m afraid.”

“No, it wouldn’t, but I bet my translator could deal with that somehow.”

Notos hesitated. “Yes, I’m sure you’re right. Well, I’ll see if I can find the key.”

“You open the door with a plain old key?”

“I agree it’s old-fashioned, but that’s the highest level of technology the Unity allows us.”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting.” The Unity certainly spared no punches when it came to controlling the dandrobians. They had no doubt also engineered themselves to have massive intellects. She began to understand their frustration and Apaté’s escape attempt. Even living in paradise life could become pretty boring without any mental stimulus. She wondered what marvellous inventions, creative works and philosophies had been lost to the galaxy due to the obstruction of dandrobian progress.

Back in her retiring room, Carrie ate the bread the dandrobians had left her and prepared for the meeting. She decided to stay in the dandrobian robes. Her Transgalactic Council jumpsuit was extremely uncomfortable and wasn’t going to fit her anytime soon, if ever. She would have to explain to Errruorerrrrrhch that she needed a larger size, she realised with dread.

While waiting to be called, she went outside to practise circle walking, the central exercise of her Bagua Zhang training. Moving and stretching her body after its restrictive confinement in her uniform felt wonderful. As she exercised, the impending meeting winkled into her mind. As a neutral observer, she could not dictate anything to either side, and she didn’t relish the thought of another several hours locked in debate.

Notos had left her promising to find the key to the library, but he hadn’t returned. She wondered what had happened to him. Dandrobians began leaving their buildings and walking in the direction of the library,. She gave up on Notos, deciding to follow the others rather than wait to be officially summoned. They were scanning the ground as they walked and Carrie did the same, carefully avoiding the several squashpumps she overtook on her way.

As the other attendees were taking their seats in the meeting room, she wandered to the other side and surreptitiously tried the handle of the door that led into the library. It rattled in its frame but remained closed. It was very strange. Why would the dandrobians lock their books away? Why would any of them want to steal one?

She settled herself down into a chair. The dandrobians talked among themselves while their slug-like guests glided and slithered onto the tabletop. She could hear the squashpumps but she could not quite make out what they were saying. She looked for Foreign Secretary Mark 1 or Mark 2 but wasn’t able to spot him.

There was an increase in volume from the squashpumps. They began sliding towards the centre of the table. Carrie caught snatches of their speech. “It’s no right,” they were saying, and “will ye look at the brazen hussy sitting there like butter wouldna melt.”

Brazen hussy? Carrie glanced uneasily from side to side. There were plenty of females in the room, but she had an uncomfortable

feeling the squashpumps were talking about her. The aliens drew closer to the table centre. When they met they didn't stop, but began sliding on top of each other. Late-arriving squashpumps glided up the table legs and across the surface to join the growing, writhing bundle of their fellows.

Watching the progress of the slug-like aliens, the dandrobians fell silent. All eyes turned to Carrie.

Finally the squashpumps' words were plain in Carrie's mind. "Wearing one of *their* outfits, if ye please! I've ne'er bin s' insulted in all ma life."

Carrie's heart froze. She looked slowly down at the ruby-red dandrobian cloth that was knotted loosely onto her body and realised the implications of what she was wearing. In removing her Transgalactic Officer uniform and accepting the clothes from Notos she had made a partisan move, destroying her appearance of neutrality.

She stood, the knot on the fabric swinging between her legs, and waved her hands in a gesture of denial. "No, no, no. You don't understand, I was swimming, and...this was just more comfortable, that's all. My uniform was too tight."

"We're no stayin' any longer," said a voice from the squirming slimy lump of squashpumps. "If we canna get satisfaction from the Transgalactic Council, we'll have tae take matters into our own hands." The lump began to disengage, and the squashpumps slid across the table and down the legs.

Carrie grabbed her head. "No, don't leave. Don't go. It's just a misunderstanding. I'll go and get changed."

But it was too late. None of the squashpumps spoke another word. The only sound in the room was a faint squelching as they glided out the door.

## Chapter Seventeen – Dry as Dust

“OOOPS,” SAID A FEMALE dandrobian, who was looking sideways at Carrie. Her hand over her mouth, she giggled.

“I hardly think this is a laughing matter, darling,” said another. “I didn’t like the sound of that threat that they were going to take matters into their own hands.”

“Hmm...” The female put a finger to her lips. “I think you’re right. Is there something we should do?” She addressed this last comment to Carrie.

Her head in her hands, the Transgalactic Council Officer looked up blearily. “I—I’m not sure.” She closed her eyes and mentally cursed her incompetence. How could she have been so stupid? Seduced by the beautiful environment, bored by the endless debate and discussion, she had forgotten her role as a neutral mediator. She tried to think of something sensible and decisive to say. “I think in the circumstances, in the face of the words from the squashpumps, it would be wise to take precautionary actions.”

The dandrobians exchanged glances. “What kind of precautionary actions do you suggest?” asked one.

“Err, prepare your defenses, that kind of thing.” But as the words left her mouth Carrie saw her mistake. The dandrobians had no defenses. They had been stripped of all technology they didn’t need for survival, particularly technology that could be used to invade or wage war on other planets. They were utterly vulnerable to whatever the squashpumps decided to do. She looked around at the beautiful ex-tyrants. What would happen to them?

Where had the squashpumps gone, and what were they doing? She would have to contact Erruorerrrrrhch and tell her what had happened. Maybe the Transgalactic Council or Unity could protect them. Would they arrive in time?

Notos arrived and stood framed by the doorway. “What’s happening? I just passed a line of squashpumps heading in the direction of their ship.”

“Oh dearie me, I do hope they aren’t going to attack,” said a dandrobian.

“Attack? Why would they do that?” asked Notos.

“They saw what I was wearing,” said Carrie, “and took it as a sign that I was on your side. They said they would act for themselves if they didn’t have the support of the Transgalactic Council.”

Closing his eyes, Notos said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. It was my idea that you wear our robes. I didn’t think. I’m such an idiot.” He covered his eyes with a hand.

Carrie joined him at the doorway. "It isn't your fault, it's mine. You aren't the diplomat, I am. I bet it's rule number one in the Transgalactic Council Liaison Officer handbook: Don't do anything that could be interpreted preferring on side over the other."

The other dandrobians were watching and listening. Notos motioned Carrie to follow him.

"I have to contact the Council," Carrie said.

"Yes, you can speak in private down here." They walked away from the library towards the complex. Suddenly the bright sunlight faded as a large object approached overhead.

"What's that?" said Carrie, though the answer was obvious. She just didn't want to believe it. A dark red, oblong spaceship was cruising closer. She swallowed. "How did the squashpumps get back to their ship so quickly?" She had seen no sign of it nearby.

"They're docked underground, where they prefer to sleep. There's a cave not far from here."

What was the squashpumps' plan to revenge themselves on the defenceless dandrobians? Carrie's throat constricted at the thought that some of them might die due to her thoughtless actions. She wished she could go back in time and put on that stupid, too-tight jumpsuit when she got out of the sea. If only Errruorerrrrhch would allow her to return to that moment and make the right decision, but there was no chance of that.

They began to run to escape the spaceship looming above, but it was hopeless. From above there came the sound of hundreds of clicks. Holes had opened in spaceship's underside, and clouds of black powder sprayed out. Carrie couldn't make out what the black stuff was. She sped over the hillside with Notos, but they were in open with nowhere to run to escape the squashpumps' weapon. As the powder hit they hunkered down, and the dandrobian covered her with his body to protect her.

But though black was all around them, it seemed to have little effect. Carrie felt no pain and she could breathe normally. Was the black material only a shower of dust? She covered her mouth and nose. "Is this stuff poisonous? What are the squashpumps doing?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure it can't be good. Quick, let's run. It isn't far to the complex now." Notos' thick, chestnut hair was turning dark grey with the falling powder.

Following him down the hill, the dust made Carrie cough and wheeze. Though it did not seem to be immediately deadly the powder was very unpleasant. Grains clung to her hair and eyelashes and coated her nostrils. She didn't want to open her mouth to speak because more of the obnoxious stuff would no doubt slip inside, adding to the grainy texture she could already feel on her tongue and

gums. All around, the soft, lush, mossy green sward began to shrivel and turn brown.

Squinting over his shoulder, Notos caught Carrie's eye and motioned towards a building at the edge of the complex. As they reached it he opened the door and they slipped into the dim interior. "Thank goodness," breathed Carrie as Notos closed the door behind them. Inside, the air was free of the nasty dust. She slumped against a wall and caught her breath.

Notos leaned forwards and ran his hands through his hair, shaking the dust from it. He rubbed his face and eyes and wiped his arms, and Carrie did the same, powdery showers falling from both of them. They seemed to be relatively unharmed, and she wondered if the squashpumps were attacking according to what would be harmful to themselves—destroying the moist, lush environment—but hardly hurting the dandrobians.

They went farther into the building's interior. All the rooms were empty. "I suppose we'll have to stay here for a while until the dust settles." Realising what she had said, Carrie put a hand over her mouth to cover a smile. Notos looked at her quizzically.

"Never mind," she said, then, "Oh." The sound of shuffling footsteps was coming from the adjoining room.

Notos frowned, then understanding dawned on his face. "Oh dear, we have to leave."

"Why? I don't fancy going out into that dust again." The footsteps shuffled closer.

"I have a horrible feeling, darling...well, they probably aren't dangerous providing we don't let them get near us."

"What? What isn't dangerous?"

"No one lives in this building. If there's anyone here, it has to be...them."

As he spoke dandrobians began to shamle into view from the adjoining room. Their eyes open and sightlessly gazing, their hands held out in front of them, they dragged their feet as they tottered forward. Their brains taken over by squashpumps, they were endlessly seeking out another organisms to infect with their parasites.

"Actually," said Carrie, "that dust doesn't seem so bad, now I come to think of it."

Notos grimaced. "I agree. Let's go."

But the parasitized dandrobians were already between them and the exit.

## Chapter Eighteen – Zombie Attack

THERE WERE FIVE OF the zombie dandrobians, three females and two males, and though they were not fast-moving, they were large and strong. They lumbered towards Carrie and Notos, their gazes fixed, their mouths drooling.

Carrie ran to one side and Notos to the other, and the group split up to follow them. Carrie darted under the outstretched arm of the nearest zombie, but it was surprisingly fast. Its hand swooped down and caught hold of her hair, lifting her off her feet. She gasped and reached up, managing to pry the stiff fingers loose as the infected dandrobian's head loomed close. She fell to the ground. But the moment's delay had given another two zombies time to reach her, and their hands gripped her arms.

On the other side of the room, Notos was trying to escape two zombies of his own. He fought and twisted and turned as they tried to pull his head close to theirs. "Carrie," he called, "hold on, I'll be there in a minute."

She kicked a zombie in the stomach, breaking its grip. It staggered back and fell to the floor but immediately rose to its feet again. She smashed another in the chin with the heel of her hand. Its head snapped back but bounced forward as it reached for her. The third zombie gripped her waist from behind, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the shadow of its face approaching. She twisted free, but fell into the arms of another zombie, which tightened its grip like a vice.

Now two zombies' faces loomed close to hers, and Carrie shrieked, imagining what it might feel like to have a squashpump squeeze into her brain. But then the two zombie heads were violently struck together, and as they fell away, stunned, Notos appeared between them. Carrie leapt and reached with all her might to kick the third zombie in the head, and together she and Notos ran for the door and outside into the dusty air.

Carrie immediately started coughing and choking again. "Thank you," she wheezed as they ran from the building, then she gasped. "I've forgotten all about Rogue. I have to go back to the retiring room. I have to get back and make sure he's indoors and safe."

"Okay, it's this way." Notos pulled a layer of his robe over his head. Carrie tried to do the same, but her folding and knotting of the material had created such a mess it was impossible. She ran after the dandrobian through the dusty air. It took only a few minutes to reach their destination. Rogue barked and leapt up at Carrie as she entered the room, almost bowling her off her feet.

“Thank goodness you’re okay.” She ruffled his hair and cuddled him as she coughed and wiped the dust from her face.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Notos poured himself a drink from the tap on the wall.

“Yes, how about you?”

“Oh I’m fine. I do apologise for the behaviour of my comrades.”

“It isn’t their fault they’re infected with squashpumps. Oh, I wish we could settle this. I’m so sorry for the way things have turned out. I’m afraid I haven’t done a very good job.”

“I’m sure you’re doing your very best.”

Carrie’s heart warmed towards the kind, handsome alien who had done so much for her.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, sipping his drink.

Carrie opened her mouth to answer, but apparently her decision had already been made for her. In a corner of the room a green mist was forming. She sighed. “Looks like I’m going home. My manager must have heard from the squashpumps or she’s been listening to the commotion through my translator.” Whatever the source of her information, Errruorerrrrrhch was recalling her. Tendrils of mist began to swirl into a spiral.

Notos put down his drink. “Carrie,” he said urgently, “I wasn’t going to say anything...but we know what happened to Apate. We know she went back with you.”

“Oh.” Her heart sank. She’d almost forgotten about the crisis she had left behind while she was dealing with the new one she had created on Dandrobia.

“Don’t worry, my dear. Everyone’s sooo angry about it. You see, if one of us escapes, it looks bad for everyone. We’re all punished with more sanctions, more prohibitions.” His face fell and he shook his head sadly. “What I was going to say was, we don’t blame you because we know what she’s like. She could charm the planet to turn the other way if she put her mind to it.”

“That’s true.” The mist was thickening. Carrie wished Notos would get to the point. She had only moments before she had to step through.

The dandrobian also had his eye on the mist. He took Carrie’s hands in his own and rushed on, “I know you’ll think it’s crazy, but I was going to offer...to come with you...to make her come back. Apate is too much for humans to handle, but I can deal with her.” He let go of her hands. “Of course, you’ll refuse, I know. It’s too much to ask. Please forget my request.”

Carrie’s mouth opened to an O, but then she shut it as she began to think. She had no idea how she was going to get Apate to return. If Notos could help her do that, at least she would have put right some



of the wrong she'd done. And he seemed trustworthy. He had sheltered her from the dust and protected her from the zombie dandrobians. With only moments to think, she made her choice. "Okay, it's worth a try."

## Chapter Nineteen – Dave’s Weak Spot

THE SCENE THAT GREETED Carrie as she stepped from the mist was pretty much as she had left it. Dave was sprawled on her kitchen floor in a puddle of milk and cereal next to the overturned table, and Apaté was in the middle of the room, adjusting her robes where they had become dislodged in the fight. Rogue bounded in from beneath the sink, and as the mist faded Notos arrived.

At the sight of the new dandrobian Dave’s face flushed red, then drained to an angry white. Carrie wondered if her friend was going to have an actual fit. While he struggled to find the words to express his reaction, she grabbed her chance. “Now don’t overreact, Dave. It isn’t as bad as it looks. This is Notos, and he’s here to take Apaté back to Dandrobia.”

Apaté smoothed her hair. “Notos, darling, how lovely to see you again.”

“Likewise, Apaté, my love,” replied the other dandrobian, and the two kissed the air on each side of the other’s face. “But you really must come home, you know.”

“Oh, I know, my love, but Earth is *such* fun.”

“Is it? What have you been doing? Tell me everything.”

“No,” said Dave, pointing a warning finger at the dandrobians. “No you don’t.”

The two aliens turned their beautiful eyes to him but did not speak. Dave clambered to his feet and grabbed the table, standing it upright. “Just hold on a minute.” He turned to Carrie, his lips set. “What the hell’s going on?”

Holding up her hands, she replied, “Everything’s fallen apart in Dandrobia. The squashpumps started to attack again. This time they’re spraying some kind of drying dust everywhere from their spaceship. But Notos here offered to come back with me to sort things out at this end. He can make sure Apaté goes back.” She looked pointedly at the female dandrobian, who failed to make eye contact. “And Errruorerrrrh will be none the wiser. At least I won’t get into trouble for Apaté.”

“Why, what else are you going to get into trouble for?” asked Dave.

“Now, I must feed Rogue,” said Carrie, striding across the kitchen before opening a cupboard.

“Carrie...” said Dave.

Notos moved between them and introduced himself, smiling warmly.

As Dave looked up into the alien’s face his annoyed look faded a

little. “Oh, hi, the name’s Dave.”

Notos’ smile widened. “I hope we can get to know each other a little better while I’m here. Humans are so interesting. I love meeting the ones who come to visit.”

“You’ve met humans before?”

“Oh yes, many times.”

“Really?”

Rogue wolfed down the food Carrie had put in his bowl, and Dave and Notos made prolonged eye contact. Apaté smirked. Carrie busied herself tidying up the mess in her kitchen. The female dandrobian joined in to help her. “Carrie, I want to apologise for my behaviour. I’m sooo sorry. I just couldn’t bring myself to leave. How I behaved was utterly unacceptable. I do hope you can forgive me.”

Carrie sighed. “Apology accepted. But, Apaté”—she looked intently at the alien—“you must go back at the next opportunity, okay? My job’s at stake if you don’t.”

“I will, I will. I solemnly promise, darling.” She turned to Notos. “We’ll go back at the earliest opportunity, won’t we, Notos, dear?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied absently.

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ROGUE SEEMED NO WORSE for his trip to Dandrobia, Carrie was happy to discover over the next few hours. She made a *nearly* complete report to Errruorerrrrrhch, leaving out only the fact that she now had two dandrobians living with her. Both would return as soon as they could, so she didn’t feel it was a fact worth mentioning.

Apaté and Notos made themselves at home while Carrie was writing her report, and Dave stuck around, getting deep into conversation with the male dandrobian. Carrie then did her usual Sunday tasks and tried to act as though she did not have two giant immortal aliens visiting.

Of all the things wrong with the situation, it was Toodles’ reaction that upset her most. Toodles had never been what could be called a friendly cat, but her habit of lashing out at anyone who happened to pass by her latest hiding place disappeared around the dandrobians. Instead, she showed a depth of affection Carrie hadn’t believed she was capable of. She rubbed up against their legs, sat on their laps and tolerated any amount of cuddles and strokes, providing it wasn’t Carrie nor any other human delivering them.

This display of affection was a low blow, considering *she* was the one that provided Toodles’ comfortable home and cared for her, and had often defended her against people who didn’t understand her

inner nature. Carrie tried hard not to be jealous of other people, but in this case she struggled.

She also seemed to be losing Dave. He and Notos' conversation was rapidly developing into something more. She wasn't sure whether she should interfere. Dave was between boyfriends and his love life was none of her business, but if one thing was clear, to her at least, it was that Notos would be returning to Dandrobia sooner rather than later, and Dave would not be going with him. She relied on Dave's sensible attitude and support, and she would need both him and Notos to get Apaté to return. What if he objected to Notos' leaving? Without both their help she was sunk. Until Erruorerrrrrhch contacted her about the situation in Dandrobia, however, there was little she could do but wait.

She was putting washed clothes in the tumble dryer when Dave came into the kitchen.

"I've got a great idea," he said. "Why don't we take Apaté and Notos out somewhere and show them around a bit?"

Carrie closed the tumble dryer door and straightened up. "What? You're the one who was telling me off for taking Apaté to the pub last night."

Her friend looked sheepish. "I know, but...I don't think it'll do any harm. And they have been confined to Dandrobia for thousands of years. Notos was telling me all about it."

"Huh, it isn't as much of a hardship as you might expect. You haven't been there. It's beautiful. They've made it perfect for themselves, and still they aren't content. It's weird. I'd love to spend the rest of my life there. They have flying horses, Dave. *Flying horses*. And you can ride them."

"Urghh, you wouldn't catch me on a flying horse. Sounds dicey. Anyway, think what they're used to. They had their pick of worlds to visit, things to see and do. After a lifestyle like that, it must be hard to adjust to just one place, no matter how perfect. What do you think? Shall we show them around? They probably don't have much time before they have to go back."

"But what if they run off? There would be nothing we could do to stop them. It wouldn't be any problem for them to make lives here, and if we told anyone they were escaped alien fugitives they'd think we're off our rockers."

"Carrie, if they wanted to do that they would have done it. Either of them could walk out the door right now and there wouldn't be a single thing we could do about it. But Apaté didn't. She came right back here after she left the pub with Rob. And, Notos, well he seems a great guy. That isn't what they're about. I'm sure of it."

"Dave, we can't take them out. We just can't. What if someone

recognises they're dandrobians? I have to keep them here until it's time for them to go back."

"Come on, what are the chances of them being recognised? It's only a tiny minority of people who know about other civilisations in the galaxy. It's a miniscule risk."

Carrie frowned. Maybe Dave was right. He was always so sensible and rational, and though she knew there was something more to Apaté at least, his point about both the dandrobians being able to leave at any time if they really wanted to, was right. She rubbed her eyes. She was tired and befuddled after all the events in Dandrobia, and she would liked to have spent the day resting, but other than that she had no concrete objection to Dave's proposal. She turned on the tumble dryer. "Okay, I suppose so."

"Great. Let's take them to London."

## Chapter Twenty – Faux Pas

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER two dandrobians and two humans alighted at Euston Station and went immediately to the Tube. To say the dandrobians attracted attention would be an understatement. Apaté was wearing the drab tracksuit Carrie had bought for her earlier, and Dave had managed to find something similar for Notos, though the legs and sleeves were much too short. Both aliens still looked gorgeous. Worrying they would be swamped by model agency scouts if they stayed in one place too long, Carrie hurried the aliens to the Houses of Parliament and from there to Tower Bridge, Piccadilly Circus and Oxford Street, and on through London's tourist attractions.

Notos and Apaté were like children on their first outing to the big city. They stared and marvelled at everything. Double decker buses, advertising hoardings, shop window displays, even the ticket machines on the London Underground.

"Oh, it's just like Palermioned. Do you remember Notos, darling? The lights, the bustle, the music?"

"You're right, Apaté, my dear. What a wonderful place that was. But the buildings—they remind me of Hacrety. Very similar don't you think?"

"Quite similar, but the wrong colours."

"Yes, the colours are quite different. These are rather drab and grey."

They were standing in front of the Barbican, a performing arts and conference centre. While the aliens discussed their impressions of their visit, Dave suggested to Carrie they try to book a show at the West End for the evening.

"Are you crazy?" Carrie's voice was a quiet squeak. "Can you imagine the kind of attention these two would attract sitting in a theatre for three hours? I'd pity whoever had to sit behind them, too." She eyed the statuesque figures. "Anyway, we can't stay out that late. I have to be back this evening when Errruorerrrrrh's going to check in with me."

"Seems a shame to bring them to London without taking them to see something."

"Wherever we take them *they're* going to be the attraction."

Dave sighed. "You're right I suppose. We need to get them somewhere they can see without being seen." His eyes grew wide. "I know just the place."

There was a long queue at the London Eye, and Apaté and Notos drew plenty of looks, but even with all the worry about being found out Carrie didn't regret Dave's choice. Apaté was rigid with

excitement, and Notos had a childlike look of wonder on his face as they watched the slow turn of the massive wheel.

“It’s so big,” squealed Apaté for the fourth time.

Notos put a hand on Carrie’s shoulder. “If this is what humans like, you must go to Xaertadon. You simply must. Where’s the landing pad?”

“Landing pad?”

“For when you jump.”

Dave laughed. “You can’t jump. Who would want to jump from all the way up there? That would be absolutely terrifying.”

“Dave, darling.” Notos grabbed his shoulders and gazed into his eyes. “Until you’ve jumped from a flying tower on Xaertadon you haven’t lived.”

“You aren’t allowed to jump,” said Carrie. “They lock the doors. So don’t try it, okay?”

Apaté’s shoulders slumped and she pouted. “Oh what a shame. What’s the point of it then?”

“You get a great view of London from the top. We thought you’d like it. But we can go and do something else if you want.” She checked her phone to see the time.

“A view sounds wonderful, doesn’t it, Apaté?” said Notos. “This city of yours seems so big. I’d love to see how far it stretches.”

A look passed between the two dandrobians.

Apaté echoed, “Yes, a view sounds wonderful.”

“Is London the main city of Earth?” Notos asked Dave.

“No, London’s only the capital of the U.K. That’s just one country on Earth. There are lots of countries and they all have their capitals. Some are much bigger than London.”

Notos raised an eyebrow. “Really? Oh yes, I remember now. Carrie was telling us all about it, weren’t you?”

“Yes, at the party,” Carrie replied. “But...don’t you remember?”

“Remember? Remember what?”

“You were here, I think, both of you. Thousands of years ago. Your names—they’re part of our ancient history.”

“Are they really? Well, I am surprised to hear you say that, darling. I don’t remember coming here. Do you, Apaté?” His alien companion shook her head.

“Well, Earth’s changed a lot since then,” said Carrie uncertainly. She found it hard to believe him. But why would he lie? Was it because he didn’t want her to associate dandrobians with colonisation of Earth? Despite his previously gracious behaviour, she began to wonder if she’d been mistaken about Notos. She had a niggling feeling that, given the dandrobians’ hunger to escape their confinement, telling them about Earth might not have been such a good idea.

“Maybe we should be getting back.”

“But we’re nearly at the head of the queue,” said Dave.

“I have to be back in time to speak to Errruorerrrrrh.”

“We’ve got loads of time. What are you on about?”

Carrie tried to signal with her eyes that she was worried about the dandrobians.

“Are you all right?” asked Dave. “Have you got a headache or something?”

“I’m fine,” she replied through her teeth.

Though the dandrobians could not jump from the London Eye they enjoyed the ride, and Apaté clapped her hands with excitement when they reached the top. “London is simply huge,” she squealed. Notos nodded and stroked his chin.

Dave insisted on one last visit before they went home, either mistaking or deliberately misinterpreting Carrie’s efforts to communicate her concerns. “You should try to get some sleep on the train, you really should,” he said as she glared at him. “But we can’t leave without seeing Buckingham Palace, and if we hurry we’ll catch the changing of the guard.”

They made it just in time. The crowd was big, but that wasn’t a problem for the aliens, who towered at least a head taller than everyone else. Both of them sighed with pleasure as the ceremony progressed. Seeing the rest of the crowd taking pictures, they wished they were allowed similar devices to capture the moment and show it to their fellows at home. Carrie thanked her lucky stars they were not. The last thing she needed was evidence that she had harboured two escaped convicts.

Notos was deeply taken by Buckingham Palace. “What a beautiful building. What wonderful architecture.” He grew wistful. “It reminds me of the palaces we built in the days of our Empire.” He shook his head. “Such was our arrogance. Such was our folly.”

Apaté’s face fell into a look of pensive sorrow.

“I must express my admiration for this remarkable place,” said Notos.

“You just did,” Carrie said.

“No, I mean I must express it in Earth fashion.” He set off towards the wall surrounding the Palace grounds.

“What do you...?” Carrie frowned, then a look of horror came over her face. “N-n-no,” she shouted, “don’t do that.”

“What’s up?” asked Dave. “What’s he going to do?”

Carrie didn’t answer. She was already hurrying to Notos, trying to catch up to him before he had a chance to do what she thought he was going to do.

She was too late. Before she could stop him, Notos was relieving



himself against the wall of Buckingham Palace.

## Chapter Twenty-One – Revelation

THE METROPOLITAN POLICE are efficient when it comes to dealing with people who defile the property of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, but not communicative about where they take the offenders. Half an hour after Notos was taken away and the crowd had dispersed, Carrie hung up from the fourth police station she had called. “He isn’t there, but they gave me another number to try.”

Dave was shaking his head. “Why? What got into him? I don’t get it.” He turned to Apate. “Is it a traditional custom in Dandrobia?”

“Certainly not. I’ve no idea why darling Notos would do such a thing.”

Unable to fight her guilt any longer, a flush rose on Carrie’s cheeks, and she turned her back to hide her face. But Dave knew her too well. “Carrie, you’ve got something to do with this, haven’t you. Tell me why that alien thought it was a good idea to pee on Buckingham Palace.”

After clearing her throat, Carrie replied, “I don’t know for sure, but it might have something to do with Rogue.”

“Rogue? How could he be responsible for...” Understanding began to dawn in his eyes. “You mean, while Rogue was with you in Dandrobia he...”

Carrie gulped and nodded. “Yes, he did. On one of their most beautiful buildings. So I told Notos that on Earth it was a sign of great admiration.”

Dave slapped his hand to his head. “Just when I think you can’t...” He sighed and closed his eyes. “Never mind.”

“Hello?” The police station Carrie was calling had answered. “I’m looking for...” She didn’t have to explain for very long about the seven-foot-tall, devastatingly handsome man who had been arrested before the desk sergeant recognised the description and confirmed that, yes, they did have such an individual in custody. She repeated the address to Dave, who wrote it down, and scanned around for a taxi.

Apate’s substantial frame took up much of the space in the London cab. Carrie watched the cabbie’s eyes as they frequently flicked to his rear-view mirror to get a better look at his gorgeous passenger, and she became concerned they would crash.

Luckily, the traffic was almost at a standstill and the dangers of an accident were small, though that didn’t ease Carrie’s peace of mind while she wondered what was happening at the police station. What would Notos tell the police officers? She was sure he didn’t know her address. She didn’t think he even knew she lived in Northampton. As

for telling them about himself, he didn't have a last name, and if he told them the truth about where he was from they would have him committed for psychiatric evaluation. She grimaced at the thought of all the explaining she would have to do.

Dave was so exasperated at her for telling Notos that silly explanation for Rogue's behaviour he wasn't speaking to her. Apaté was perfectly serene. She gazed out the cab window in wonder, hungrily taking in every place and scene they passed as if it were the last thing she would ever see, apparently unconcerned about what might happen to her fellow dandrobian. Carrie wondered if she didn't really care about him or she was confident he would come to no harm.

After thrusting the fare and a tip into the cabbie's hand, Carrie burst through the doors of the police station, Dave hurrying behind. Apaté glided in last, smiling serenely.

Surrounded by several police officers, Notos was lounging in the station's reception area. The atmosphere appeared relaxed and convivial, and the dandrobian must have just finished relating a funny story because the officers were grinning and chuckling and one was wiping her eyes.

"Notos, darling," breathed Apaté, going up to him and air kissing both of his cheeks.

"Apaté, sooo wonderful to see you."

"Is this your sister, sir?" asked an officer.

"No, but she's a very close relation." Putting an arm over Apaté's shoulders, he turned to Carrie and Dave. "Thank you so much for coming to find me. I've been having a wonderful time with my new friends, but I really mustn't keep them from their work any longer."

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NO CHARGES WERE FILED against the dandrobian. In fact, the police seemed glad that Notos had relieved himself on one of Her Majesty's buildings because it meant they'd had the pleasure of meeting him.

During the taxi ride and all the way home on the train, while Notos and Dave were deep in conversation and Apaté watched the passing countryside with interest, Carrie wondered how things were progressing on Dandrobia. What were the squashpumps doing, and how it was affecting the dandrobians? She wasn't making a good impression with Errruorerrrrrhch and there was a chance she would take her off the case. If her manager did that Carrie wouldn't get a chance to take Apaté and Notos home. She would be personally responsible for the escape of two convicts. Truth be told, she was already responsible for the escape of two convicts.

They took another taxi from Northampton railway station to Carrie's flat. As well as reducing the chances of the dandrobians attracting attention, Carrie also wanted to get both of them inside and away from the sights and sounds of Earth, which they seemed to be falling in love with.

Rogue, as usual, bounded up when Carrie opened her front door, but backed away growling when he saw the aliens. Apate and Notos also drew back, and Carrie shooed her dog into the kitchen. It seemed as though he would never like dandrobians. Toodles, however, slunk out of her hiding place and leapt onto Apate's lap when she and Notos sat down in the living room.

Carrie and Dave joined Rogue in the kitchen. She sat at the table and rested her chin on her hand. Rogue sniffed at the gap beneath the door to the living room, softly whining. He pawed at the door.

"What's up?" asked Dave as he helped himself to her biscuits.

"What am I going to do, Dave? There I was thinking it would be so easy to get Apate back to Dandrobia if I had a friendly dandrobian to help. But I just assumed I would be going back. I'm speaking to Errruorerrrrh soon. What if she tells me I'm not returning? That I'm off the case? Gavin replaced me quickly enough before. What if she does the same?"

"What if she does?"

"I'm left with two alien absconders living with me, that's what. Maybe forever. And that's the least of my problems. If what's happened gets out, that's it. Like you said, I'm out of a job. And that's the nicest thing the Council will do."

Dave munched thoughtfully, leaning against the fridge. "Oh well, there's not a lot you can do about it, so why worry?"

"Why worry? Huh, that's easy for you to say." Carrie paused. She pointed a finger at Dave. "You've changed your tune. The other day you were telling me off for taking Apate out, like I was a naughty schoolgirl. Now it's all no big problem. And I know why."

Reaching into the tin for another biscuit, her friend asked, "Why's that, then?"

"You know. There's no need for me to spell it out."

Dave shrugged and picked out a custard cream.

"You fancy him, don't you? Notos."

He threw the biscuit into his mouth and smiled as he chewed.

"I know," sighed Carrie. "He's gorgeous, isn't he? They all are. You should see them. It's like Oscar Night minus all the make-up and plastic surgery."

"Yeah, they do look incredibly like us."

Carrie suddenly remembered she had meant to look up who Apate and Notos were in Greek mythology. All she knew was that they were

minor gods. She took out her phone from her pocket and typed the names into a search engine. When she read the entries that appeared, her jaw fell open and her eyes stretched wide. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?"

Carrie wordlessly handed her friend the phone.

"Apate, the goddess of deceit," he read. "That isn't good. But look, Notos was only a wind god. That isn't too bad, is it?"

"I told you what happened to the squashpump Foreign Secretary, didn't I? His accident was due to a freak gust of wind. Wind gods can control the wind. On Dandrobia the dandrobians control everything."

Had Notos blown down the squashpump Foreign Secretary's column at the open air meeting? She shook her head and sighed. "How could I be so blind? Apate's been playing with all this time, I'm sure of it. Dandrobians can pass as humans, and Earth is the only place in the galaxy they can go where they won't be easy to find and capture. What if Apate was the front runner? Now Notos is here. What if the dandrobians are planning an invasion of Earth?" She buried her head in her hands. "What have I done?"

"They must be trying to get the whole population over. Apate was saying there aren't many of them left. They could disappear into Earth's billions." She lowered her hands. "But to get the rest of them here they need spaceships, or transgalactic gateways. They don't have spaceships and the Council controls the gateways."

"And so do the placktoids."

"Yes, them too." She'd forgotten about the mechanical aliens she had encountered on her previous assignment, who were illegally using gateway technology.

"Well, it's a shame," said Dave. "Notos seems like a good bloke. But you have to tell your manager."

"You're right." Carrie slumped onto the table, but after a moment she sat up. "Wait. How about...What if I can expose the entire dandrobian plot to Errruorerrrrh? She might forgive the mistake I made letting Apate and Notos escape."

Dave pulled a skeptical face. "Do you really think so?"

"I don't know. But what do I have to lose?"

"The dandrobians invading Earth?"

"No, if they could all get to Earth they would have already. They can't, not yet. They're waiting for something, or they need something. If I find out what, I can show Errruorerrrrh the whole plan and maybe she won't sack me."

Shaking his head, Dave said, "Well, you'd better hope she hasn't taken you off the case already."

"I'll find out soon. Dave, if she does send me back...I want you to come with me."

“What? No, I’m not allowed.”

“I’ve already broken so many rules one more won’t make any difference. And I need you. This is why everything’s going to pot. You aren’t there to help me like you were on Oootoon. I can’t do it without you.”

She paused and turned her head. She’d heard nothing from the living room for a while. Had Apate and Notos overheard them? She opened the door to the living room. The room was empty. She ran through and out into the hallway. The front door was also ajar.

Rogue was right behind Carrie, and he took his chance. Bounding out of the flat he leapt, barking, down the stairs and out into the street. Standing dumbfounded, Carrie heard a voice coming from her translator.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, where are you?”

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Carrie Thwarted

THE TENSION IN THE air was palpable when Carrie and Dave arrived in the receiving hall. None of the dandrobians questioned Dave's presence, though they must have known it was unorthodox. Apate and Notos had now both managed to slip out of Dandrobia and the dandrobians must also have known that, yet they were saying nothing, waiting for Carrie to make the first move. Presumably they wouldn't inform the Transgalactic Council about Dave until they knew what she was going to do.

Carrie's heart ached at the memory of Rogue bounding downstairs and outside. He had never run away from her before, never. And though she thought he was only making sure the dandrobians left, and she knew she would return to Earth only seconds after he'd gone so she would have plenty of time to go after him, still the idea that she might not find him twisted her stomach into knots of fear.

"He'll be okay," said Dave quietly, watching Carrie's expression as the dandrobians escorted them out of the hall.

She turned away and forced down her tears. The group of dandrobians moved ahead.

"So, what have you got to do exactly?" asked Dave.

Her friend already knew the answer to this question. He had heard her conversation with Errruorerrrrrhch, but he was trying to distract her from her misery. "I have to inspect the damage and assess what help the dandrobians need," she replied woodenly.

"Do you think they'll allow them the technology to defend themselves?"

"Depends on the harm the squashpumps are causing, I should think. Their weapons seemed pretty inoffensive from what I could tell."

"That's odd," said Dave. "What's the point of weapons that don't hurt anyone?"

Carrie was too miserable to care. She was sick of the whole situation. She wanted to go home and find her dog. He was far more important than a job with the Transgalactic Council.

"So as you can see," said a female dandrobian, turning around and indicating with a spreading motion the scene around them, "the squashpumps' attack has been quite devastating."

The lush green sward that lay between the buildings was dry and brown, and the bright stone of the walls was covered in a dark grey patina. In the distance, dandrobians infected by squashpumps were roaming, legs stiff, their arms held out before them.

"Steer clear of them," said Carrie to Dave, pointing at the zombie-

like aliens.

“Why?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“What else would you like to see?” asked the female alien. “The damage is clear. The Transgalactic Council must do something to protect us or allow us to leave. We simply can’t go on living here. The squashpumps’ actions have set a precedent and other former colonies will come and attack us. Dandrobia’s coordinates are hardly a secret.”

“That’s a bit of a jump,” said Carrie. “I can’t see any reason why others would follow the squashpumps’ example.”

“Oh but they will,” protested a male dandrobian. “They have this terrible victim mentality. They all want their reparations, their revenge. Ungrateful things. We brought civilisation to half of them, didn’t we?” He turned to his fellows and they nodded.

*Civilisation at the expense of what? Carrie wondered. Tyranny? Subjugation?*

“Now, now, darlings” said another dandrobian, “why don’t we let Officer Hatchett do her job? I’m sure we can trust her to complete a thorough inspection. Then perhaps she and her companion would like to join us for a small supper this evening before a wider inspection tomorrow?” Carrie was supposed to stay the night, and the following day the dandrobians would take her to see the damage the squashpumps had caused further afield.

“Yes,” said the female, “the evidence speaks for itself. If the Transgalactic Council sees a full report of what the terrible squashpumps have done, they’re bound to finally lift those awful sanctions and allow us to leave.”

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CARRIE TOOK DAVE AROUND the complex as she inspected it and the surrounding landscape, where the squashpumps’ dust had sucked the moisture out of everything but hadn’t apparently caused any other damage. Then they went together to the retiring room.

“What’s this? Some sort of food?” Dave picked up the circle of bread from the table and took a bite. “Mmmm, it’s delicious.”

Carrie inhaled sharply as she recalled the dandrobian’s history in Ancient Greece. “I think I know now. It might be ambrosia.” She pointed to the tap in the wall. “And maybe that supplies nectar. Ambrosia and nectar are what the Ancient Greek gods ate and drank, or...” Her eyes grew wide. “Dave, if I’m right, and that is what I think it is, it might make you immortal.”

“What,” exclaimed Dave through a full mouth. He spat out the



remnants of the bread onto the table.

“Urgh...what did you do that for?”

“I don’t know if I want to be immortal. I need to think about it.”

“What do you mean, you don’t want to be immortal? Everyone wants to be immortal. You don’t want to die, do you?”

“Not right this minute, but that doesn’t mean I want to live forever either.”

“Dave, that’s crazy.”

“Crazy? I’ll tell you what’s crazy: travelling millions of light years across the galaxy in a glowing green mist and working with immortal pinup stars of Ancient Greece.” He paused and went to the window. Looking out, he said, “That manager of yours isn’t around is she?”

“Errruorerrrrrh hasn’t set foot, or claw, on the planet the whole time I’ve been coming here. Anyway, you don’t need to worry about her. She isn’t going to hurt you any more than Gavin would. The Transgalactic Council wouldn’t employ them as managers if they were dangerous, would they?”

“Okay, so what’s the plan?”

“Well...” Carrie bit her lip. “I want you to steal something for me.”

Dave turned from the window. “What do you mean?”

“You remember the big building outside the complex that I showed you? Part of it is a library containing information about the dandrobians, or so Notos told me. But the door’s locked, which makes no sense, so I think there must be something...”

Dave held up a hand to silence her. “That isn’t what I meant. Why are you asking me to steal for you?”

“Oh come on, Dave, you know why.”

Her friend folded his arms and glared at her. “No, I don’t. Please explain.”

“Because you...you know...that’s what you do, and...” Carrie withered under his stare. “You—you’re good at it.”

“Carrie,” said Dave, his jaw set, “you’re a good friend, so I’ll forgive you for this misunderstanding. But please don’t mistake my medical condition with something I have voluntary control over. It isn’t like I *want* to steal things. I can’t help myself.”

“I know. I wasn’t saying anything different. But I—I just thought it would come in handy right now. Maybe I can find out what the dandrobians are planning. They’re obviously up to something.”

Dave rolled his eyes. “Maybe they are, and maybe there is something in the library, but you do know what involuntary means, don’t you? I don’t plan it. I can’t just go and steal something on purpose, however convenient it might be for you.”

Carrie sat on the chaise longue and pulled a piece of bread from a loaf. “That makes things a bit difficult.”

There was a knock at the door. When Carrie opened it a svelte blonde dandrobian was there. "Are you both rested?" When Carrie and Dave nodded, she clasped her hands together breathlessly and said, "Oh good. Do come with me to a little supper we've prepared."

"We'd love to," said Carrie, "but could you just give us a minute?"

"Of course," said the alien, and Carrie closed the door. She fished in her bag and took out mascara, eyeshadow, blusher and lipstick before going over to the mirror.

"What are you doing?" asked Dave.

"What does it look like? I'm getting ready to go out."

"But you don't wear makeup."

"Er, hello?" Carrie waved her mascara stick at him.

Dave leaned in a corner and put his hands in his pocket, his head tilted to one side as he watched her. Carrie pulled a brush through her hair, trying to flatten its stubborn kink. She peered at her newly made-up face. She definitely needed more practice at applying cosmetics, but the result looked better than nothing at all.

"There," she said, turning to Dave and smiling brightly. "All done. Shall we go?"

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Squashpump Surprise

“I WISH I DIDN’T HAVE to wear this horrible jumpsuit. I look awful,” said Carrie as she and Dave followed the blonde dandrobian.

Her friend shook his head. “What do you care?”

“That’s easy enough for you to say, Mr. Gorgeous and Always Perfectly Dressed. As it happens, as well as this stupid uniform being uncomfortably tight, it makes me feel even more fat and unattractive than I normally would, now that I’m around the dandrobians.”

Dave tutted. “Looks aren’t important, Carrie.”

“Only good-looking people say that. And it isn’t true. Look at yourself. You certainly thought looks were important when it came to Notos.”

“Well, okay. They do make a difference. But if Notos was some asshole, I wouldn’t give him the time of day. Looks are *that* important, I should say. Not when it comes to things that matter.”

Carrie stopped and clenched her fists. “You don’t know.” Her voice trembled as she spoke. “Don’t say that, because you have no idea what it’s like when you aren’t attractive, when you’re just average, or even worse, downright unattractive.” As Dave’s face softened in concern, Carrie blinked back the tears that were rising in her eyes. She shook her head. “Don’t take any notice of me. It’s just being around these damned dandrobians makes me feel so inadequate.”

Ahead of them a door opened and light spilled out into the gathering dusk. “Wonderful,” drawled the male dandrobian standing in the doorway, as they drew near. He turned to the others inside, exclaiming, “They’re here, everyone.” As they reached the doorway, he said, “Do come in out of that dreadful dust.” He ushered the two humans to seats inside. Soon, shell beakers of the dandrobians’ special beverage were placed in their hands.

“Drink up, drink up,” chorused the dandrobians, giggling and clutching each other in a way that told Carrie they had already drunk plenty themselves. Dave eyed the contents of his cup and sniffed it.

“It’s fine,” said Carrie. “It’s really nice, in fact. It makes you tipsy but you don’t have a hangover the next day.”

Dave glanced around. The dandrobians were drifting away to chat and laugh in groups. He said quietly. “Do you think it’s wise in the circumstances?”

“Oh for goodness sake, Dave, lighten up. First you don’t want to be immortal, now you don’t want to have a little drink. Where’s the harm in it? You’re on another world. Enjoy yourself for once.” Carrie took a large swig.

“Take it easy, Carrie. Are you worried about Rogue? We’ll have

plenty of time to go and look for him when we get back. You should be more cautious. You are on duty after all."

Carrie took another drink. "Dave, I'm not a police officer, I'm a Transgalactic Community..." She burped. "...Liaison Officer. Pardon me. Try some."

Lifting the beaker to his lips, Dave took a sip. "Not bad."

"Told you. Have some more. There's plenty where that came from. They have an endless supply, I think. There's probably a tree that exudes the stuff as its sap, or it bubbles up from a spring somewhere."

Dave was tipping back his head as he drained his cup. "It's great." He had hardly brought the beaker down when a smiling dandrobian filled it again. "Thanks very much." He took another swallow, and another.

"Hold on," said Carrie, "I can't keep up with you at that rate."

It was the last thing she remembered saying before waking up in the grey morning light the following day.

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SHE WAS LYING ON A long seat in the party room. Dave was lying on another across from her, still asleep. They were alone.

She sat up and swung her legs down. As before, the night's drinking had left no after effect. She tiptoed to the door to avoid waking her friend, turned the handle and pulled. The door did not open. She tried again, but they seemed to be locked in. Her heart began to race. She scanned around. The room had no windows, nor any other exit.

She knocked on the door, hoping the dandrobians had locked them in by mistake. No one answered, but the sound woke Dave.

"That was some night." He blinked and stretched as he sat up.

"We're locked in," said Carrie.

"What?" He rubbed his eyes as joined her at the door and pulled on the handle. Banging with his fist, he shouted, "Hello? Hello?"

"They must have locked us in here on purpose. Goodness knows what they're up to. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know...oh yes I do. You can contact your manager. You brought your bag. You've got the translator."

"Yes, of course." Carrie searched for her bag on and under the seats and tables. She didn't find it. Thinking back to previous evening, she was sure she recalled putting her makeup away and taking the bag with her as they left the retiring room. "I did bring it. I remember."

"I remember you bringing it, too." Dave was also searching, but he gave up. "It isn't here."

As the truth dawned, they sat down together. Neither said a thing. What was there to say? They were trapped. How long would they would be in there? Would the dandrobians ever let them out again?

"They can't keep us here forever," said Carrie. "Errruorerrrrrh knows I'm here. If I don't report back she'll alert the Council and they'll send people to find us."

"What if they tell her you were in a freak accident like that squashpump, and that you died?"

"They can't do that. They'd have to provide my body as evidence."

"They might say you disappeared, or maybe they could grow a body. They are genetic engineers after all. All they'd need would be some of your DNA, which they could get off a beaker you drank from."

Carrie shook her head. "They don't have the technology to do that anymore."

Dave didn't reply. He was looking at a corner of the ceiling. "What's that?" A dark grey, soft lump was there, growing steadily larger.

It took Carrie a moment to realise what it was, and when she did her heart froze.

"There's another one," said Dave. He was pointing at a place where the floor met the wall. This lump was larger than the first. It was nearly through.

Carrie ran to the door and hammered on it. "Let us out," she shouted. "Let us out, please. I'm begging you. Please." She tugged on the door handle.

"What is it?" asked Dave. "What's wrong?"

Spinning round, her back to the door, Carrie watched as more soft grey lumps emerged. The one appearing from the ceiling plopped to the floor with a squelch. More followed it. From the tiniest gap in the walls, floor or ceiling they came, their flexible bodies oozing through.

Heart thumping, Carrie squeaked, "They're squashpumps. And they've come to zombify us."

## Chapter Twenty-Four – Secret Message

DAVE ROLLED HIS EYES. “Honestly, Carrie, you overreact sometimes. Look at them. They’re just big slugs. If they try to attack us, we can just squish them.”

Carrie was vigorously shaking her head. “You haven’t seen them in action. You haven’t seen how fast they can move. What they can do.” She began to edge towards a corner where no squashpump had yet emerged.

“I’ll tread on one and show you,” said Dave, stepping towards a large squashpump.

“No, don’t,” Carrie exclaimed. “You can’t just squash them. They’re intelligent.” Remembering the way the Foreign Secretary had survived being sliced in half, she was not sure that squashing would hurt them anyway.

“Watch out,” said Dave.

Something wet and heavy fell onto Carrie’s shoulder. She shrieked and flicked the squashpump onto the floor. Almost immediately another landed on her head. “Urgh.” She pulled it off and threw it in a random direction, which happened to be towards Dave’s face. The creature landed with a slap. An image of a squashpump disappearing behind a dandrobian eyeball vivid in her mind, Carrie screamed and darted to her friend. He pulled the alien off before she reached him and flung it down, raising a foot. Carrie, already speeding towards him, knocked him off his feet. They landed in a heap.

“What are you doing?” exclaimed Dave.

“I told you, you can’t kill them. They’re sentient. They can talk.”

Pushing himself upright, Dave said, “Why don’t they, then?”

“I think they are.” Amid all the squishing and squelching, Carrie could hear the squashpumps’ squeaks. “We can’t understand them without the translator.”

She stood up and hugged herself, her shoulders raised. The room was alive with squashpumps. The floor, walls and ceiling were covered with them. She inched backwards, away from those near her feet, but stopped when she saw there were more behind her. “There’s one good thing.”

“What’s that?”

“If they wanted to zombify us they’re taking a long time about it.”

Dave didn’t answer. He was staring at a wall, his head tilted. There were squashpumps all over it, and the ones that were not already there were sliding towards it.

“Am I imagining it?” asked Dave.

It took Carrie a few moments to figure out what he meant. There

were shapes on the wall made up of squashpump bodies. Very familiar shapes. The creatures were forming the letters of the Roman alphabet, and words and sentences. Even before it was complete, Carrie could read the message.

WE MEAN NO HARM  
FORCED TO ATTACK  
PLEASE HELP US

Carrie's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh my goodness," she said between her fingers. She turned to Dave. At the same moment the faint sound of dandrobian voices came through the door, growing louder. What would they do if they saw the room full of squashpumps? Even if they didn't see the message, they would suspect the squashpumps had tried to inform on them.

The squashpumps must have heard the voices too, for they began to glide rapidly towards the nearest escape routes. Carrie ran to the wall and began picking squashpumps off it and putting them next to gaps in the floor and ceiling so they could escape. Dave joined her.

"Quick, hurry," said Carrie. She grabbed handfuls of the squashpumps that were farthest from safety and bundled them into the room corners, flinging cushions over them. The dandrobian voices were louder. They were nearly at the door. Carrie and Dave stuffed squashpumps in beakers and jugs, put them on chairs facing away from the door or threw them underneath. As a key turned in the lock, Carrie was still holding one squashpump. She winced and pushed it down the front of her jumpsuit, where it lay on her chest, wet and warm.

The door opened. "Darlings," drawled the male dandrobian in the doorway. Another, a female, was standing just behind him, smiling warmly.

"You simply have to forgive us," continued the male. "You were both sleeping sooo soundly last night we didn't want to disturb you, but we locked the door in case any of our poor infected fellows were wandering nearby. Then we all slept late and forgot about you."

"We really are awfully sorry," said the female. "You do forgive us, don't you? Tell us you do, oh please, won't you?" She batted her eyelashes.

The squashpump nestling on Carrie's bare skin squirmed, and she swallowed. "Oh, don't worry. We forgive you, don't we, Dave?"

He nodded. "Hmmm," he said, his lips firmly closed, a pained expression on his face.

A horrible realisation dawned over Carrie. She dragged her eyes from her friend and back to the dandrobians, saying brightly, "Shall we go then?"

“Yes, we must get you some breakfast,” said the male dandrobian. As the two turned to leave. Dave spat a squashpump into his hand. He pulled another from under his shirt, while Carrie retrieved hers from her jumpsuit. Stooping to put down squashpumps, they followed the dandrobians outside.



## Chapter Twenty-Five – Out to Sea

CROSSING THE NOW DRY, barren space between the buildings, the male dandrobian elbowed his companion in her ribs. “Shall we tell them now?”

“No, let’s...are you all right, darling?” As she was replying, the female had caught sight of Dave’s face, which was pale green.

He smiled tightly. “I’m fine, thanks, just fine.”

“Well, if you’re sure...” She did not look convinced. “I suppose we might as well tell you now. We would like to take you on an ocean voyage today, to see the wider damage the squashpumps caused with their dreadful dust.”

“The ocean’s the safest place on the planet at the moment,” said the male. “The dust can’t do us much harm there. It just sinks to the bottom. We can take you to the other affected areas and stay just a short time before returning to the water.”

Carrie didn’t want to agree to the suggestion. She suspected the dandrobians were up to something. They were definitely manipulating the squashpumps somehow, and she didn’t believe their story about locking her and Dave up for their own protection. They had obviously wanted to prevent them from having any contact with the squashpumps, and maybe from seeing things they didn’t want them to see. But she couldn’t think of a reasonable reason to refuse. “I tell you what, let’s eat while I think about it.”

“Of course, my love. You must be starrrrving,” said the female.

Carrie grimaced. The danrobians’ style of speech had begun to grate, and their overly affectionate behaviour and language struck her as deeply false. She wondered what they were really like. Were they all like Apaté, deceitful and liable to turn in a second from apparently sweet and endearing to defiant and aggressive?

Stalling over a delicious breakfast of dandrobian bread and richly flavoured, sweet fruits, Carrie failed to come up with a way of avoiding the ocean trip. She had no alternative but to agree to the dandrobians’ proposal.

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ARRIVING AT THE SHORE, Carrie relaxed a little as she inhaled the sea air. It was wonderful to return to the ocean where she had had a wonderful swim and had been carried through the waves on the back of a sea creature. But she was surprised to see there was no ship nor any other water transport. Surely they weren’t going to travel on

miliots?

"You'd think they'd have a boat ready," said Dave.

She didn't reply, wondering how the dandrobians travelled long distances across the ocean without complex technology. Sailboats?

An alien waded out a short distance into the water, his robes floating around him. When he was chest deep, he dipped underneath. Carrie expected to see him surface as he began swimming, but he didn't reappear. The other dandrobians were unperturbed by this behaviour.

"What's he doing?" Dave asked Carrie.

"I think...I think he might be arranging our transportation." .

"He is," said a nearby dandrobian, overhearing their conversation. "It should arrive soon."

"He's going to drown if he stays under much longer," said Dave.

"No, no," said the alien. "A few of us can breathe under water. A remnant from the days when we could engineer our bodies to do whatever we liked. When we lost the war and were confined to this world, we were stuck with whichever adaptation we happened to be sporting at the time."

The head of the water-breathing dandrobian broke the surface a short distance away. Standing upright, he rose higher and higher until he was impossibly high above the waves. Carrie gasped. A wide, silvery shape appeared in the water around him. He was standing on the back of a sea creature, and as it surfaced it carried him up with it. Sea water ran in torrents from its back as it rose. Wide and flat, it was shaped like a manta ray. Finally the creature stopped rising and bobbed gently as it lay floating on the ocean surface.

"I think our ride's arrived," Carrie said.

"Off we go," said a dandrobian, and Carrie and Dave followed the party out into the waves.

Broad and flat and glistening in the pink-tinged sunlight, the creature's back held a series of ridges large enough to provide low, dandrobian-sized seats. At its front were eyes, just submerged, and on the upper surface were two holes like nostrils or whale blowholes. The water-breathing dandrobian seated himself behind these.

"Is it safe?" whispered Dave as he and Carrie settled into side-by-side seats.

"It's safe, I'm sure of it," replied Carrie quietly. "All dandrobian animals were engineered to be helpful or at least harmless a long time ago. I think this trip we're taking is safe, too. If they wanted to kill us they could have done it earlier and in a much less elaborate way than this. The weakest dandrobian could snap our necks like wishbones."

"Gee, thanks for that thought."

"You know what I mean. Anyway, there are sea creatures that

bring you back to shore if you swim out of your depth. We'd find it hard to drown if we wanted to. And some of them are coming with us. No, whatever they've got planned, they don't want to hurt us. At least not yet."

The dandrobian sitting at the head of the aquatic animal turned and called, "Are we all comfortable?"

"Yes, dear, we're ready!" replied his fellows.

He reached into the hand-sized nostrils of the creature, and its wings began to undulate in the water. It turned smoothly so that it faced out to sea, and the ocean breeze whipped Carrie's hair back from her face. Within a few moments they began to move forward, and soon they were sailing smoothly out into the waves.

The water was calm, and the motion of the animal was even, so that there was only a gentle rocking up and down, as if they were being rocked in a cradle. The sea breeze was balmy. Above, the large, pale sun came from behind a cloud, setting the wave tips alight. As they drew farther from the shore, Carrie began to relax. The air was warm, the sun was bright, and she was riding a magnificent sea creature across the ocean of an alien planet.

Gazing into deep blue sky she saw, flying high above them, its wings dazzlingly bright, a pegasus. She grabbed Dave's arm and pointed.

"Bloody hell," he said as he caught sight of the mythical animal.

"Is everything all right?" called a dandrobian seated behind them.

"Oh yes," called Carrie.

"Are you enjoying yourselves?" said the dandrobian. "We thought you would."

"But where are we going?" asked Carrie.

The dandrobian laid a finger along his nose and winked. "All in good time, my dears. All in good time."

## Chapter Twenty-Six – Window to the Past

THE WAVES WERE GROWING larger, but their transportation skirted smoothly through the water. Carrie lay back in her seat, letting the motion sway her. On their left lay the coastline, and they remained within sight of it as they travelled. To their right was nothing but waves. Carrie wondered what land masses Dandrobia had and what they were like. The same rolling green hills and wildflowers as were around the complex rose along the shoreline. Carrie pointed them out to Dave, showing him the beauty of Dandrobia in the areas where the squashpumps had not scattered their dust.

Her friend turned to the dandrobians behind. "It's a beautiful world you have here."

The aliens exchanged glances and smiled wistfully. "Thank you," said one, giving a slight bow "You're very gracious. But we've lived with this design for millenia."

"You can change the landscape?" asked Dave.

The dandrobian sighed. "We used to be able to, until they took away our technology. We could have whatever we wanted." She gestured to the land they were passing. "I remember when this area was high cliffs. Sooo dramatic, darling. It was wonderful."

"Did you like them?" asked her fellow. "I thought they were rather cliché. I much preferred the sand dunes."

"Each to her own, but my point, dearest human, is that we've lived with the same old thing for thousands of years. It no longer captivates us. But we appreciate the compliment, don't we, loves?"

"Oh yes, you're very kind." "It's very sweet of you." "Absolutely wonderful."

"Of course," continued another, "engineering the landscape is a mere frippery. We can do without it. What's worse is that now we can die. If we have a serious accident we're gone, just like that." He snapped his fingers. "There was a time when if, for example, one of us was so unfortunate as to tumble from those cliffs, we might have been able to save the poor thing. Nowadays, an accidental knock to the head, a slip of a knife, and poof!"

"Well, you do live forever otherwise," said Dave, "so it doesn't seem that hard a fate."

Dave's opinion was not well received by the dandrobians. There were a few dark looks and frowns, but they quickly recovered their composure. "You probably wouldn't understand," said one. "If you can live for eternity, it makes dying that much harder."

Dave glanced at Carrie and turned back round to face the front.

A puzzling idea had struck Carrie but she wasn't sure if she should

voice it. The conversation seemed to be straying into awkward territory, and the two of them were at the mercy of their hosts. She didn't want to anger them, but Carrie had never been good at controlling her impulses. "But, if you don't have the technology to prevent deaths from accidents any more, I'm assuming the rest of your medical care is pre-industrial too."

"That's absolutely right, dear. You're so clever. It's a dreadful shame."

"So, if that's the case, how come you're all so perfect? No one has any scars or burns or stumps or anything. You're all whole and flawless. Why is that? Sorry for asking. I don't mean to be rude."

For the second time the dandrobians' equanimity slipped. They fidgeted and looked at each other. "Oh," one broke out, "you've only seen a few of us. Some dandrobians have dreadful scars. Just dreadful." She shook her head.

"Nearly there," called the pilot over his shoulder. He pointed to the shore.

Carrie followed the line of his finger to a distant hill. It was a lush, green, smoothly shaped mound, and on the top of it was a sight that made Carrie's heart leap. It was not made of rough, dirty white marble, battered by thousands of years' exposure to the elements, but it was unmistakeable. On a solid rectangular base were a series of columns supporting a low-pitched roof. The building was a riot of colour, but Carrie recognised it all the same. The Parthenon.

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"DO YOU THINK WE HAVE to climb all the way to the top?" Dave asked Carrie as they disembarked the sea creature and waded through the shallows.

Close up, the hill was taller than it had appeared out at sea. Carrie estimated it was about 200 metres above sea level. No wonder it dominated the landscape. "Stop complaining. It'll give you some much-needed exercise." She always despaired at how hopelessly out of shape Dave was. He could get away with it now while he was young, but when he was older he would pay the price.

"I don't mind a bit of a stroll," he said, "but that'll be like climbing Everest."

Carrie rolled her eyes.

A dandrobian who had overheard their conversation wrapped a friendly arm around Dave's shoulders, making him stagger. "Don't worry, darling. We don't have to climb up. That would be dreadfully tiresome. No, no, the temple's just for show." He chuckled. "Have

patience, my loves. We're nearly there, and then all will be revealed."

The two humans followed the aliens in a wide circle around the base of the hill. The land that spread out around them was mixed forest and scrub, and some open patches of ground that held only one type of plant.

"We're in an agricultural district," explained a dandrobian.

"Really? It doesn't look like any farmland I've ever seen."

He shrugged. "We don't farm. We gather. The land and plants are self-sustaining. Of course, nothing on Dandrobia is poisonous to us, but outside the agricultural zones the planting is mostly ornamental. It's convenient to grow our major crops together in certain areas. This is one such place. There are many, scattered about."

"Wow, you really thought of everything, didn't you?"

"Not us, my dear." He smiled condescendingly. "Our ancestors were the ones who created these places and others, before boredom and overpopulation drove them to seek out new worlds. We tweaked, here and there, and engineered the planets we colonised."

*Conquered*, thought Carrie. But, though the dandrobians were not to be trusted, she couldn't help admire them for their achievements. They had created a paradise, even if they didn't appreciate it. But what did they have in store for her and Dave? All pretence about taking them to see areas the squashpumps had damaged seemed to have been forgotten.

They were nearing the side of the hill away from the shore, and the leading dandrobian was striding purposefully towards the green bank of its side. Only the hill was in front of her. Carrie wondered if maybe they would have to climb it after all, as there was nowhere else for them to go but up. The female stopped at the hill's base and turned. "Are we quite sure, everyone?" She was speaking to the other dandrobians, not to Carrie or Dave.

"Yes, don't let's stop now. We've come this far. We can't go back."

"Very well." She about-faced and resumed her path, but as she reached the bottom her feet didn't step upwards, they disappeared into the grass. In a moment she had walked right into the hill.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – Revelation

CARRIE AND DAVE GAPED.

“Don’t worry, loves. She’s only gone inside. We’ll follow. It’s perfectly safe.”

Dave’s alarmed eyes sought Carrie’s, but she had no reassuring look to return. They kept pace with their companions as they neared the hill, and her arms came up reflexively as they went inside.

She felt nothing at all as they passed through the seemingly solid grassy slope. *It’s just an illusion.* Inside, the light was so brilliant she had to screw up her eyes. Myriad overhead lights were reflecting off a shiny floor and walls. Checking behind her, where they had entered, she saw a faceless wall with a faint line marking the boundary of the entrance.

They were in a room that must have filled the base of the hill. It was utterly unlike all the dandrobian structures Carrie had seen. There was none of the aging, faded, colourful charm of the receiving hall, retiring room, meeting room and other buildings in the government complex. This place could have been built yesterday. Each surface was spotlessly clean and white, from floor to ceiling. Cubicles ran down both sides, their walls too high for Carrie to see over, and there were narrow corridors between them and the main walls. In the centre was an open space. Bizarrely, the place reminded her of the call centre where she and Dave worked, only the cubicles were larger. It was also immaculate and looked brand new.

Carrie realised her mouth was hanging open, and she shut it like a trap. Dave looked similarly amazed. The dandrobians were watching them steadily, their faces inscrutable, though their affable masks had been dropped. They were all very, very serious.

“Welcome to our engineering center,” said one.

“Your...? But you...” Carrie didn’t know what to say.

“We aren’t allowed to engineer, nor have engineering centres,” said another dandrobian. “Precisely. And yet we do have them. And this isn’t the only one.”

“Shhh, don’t tell her so much.”

“There’s no point in keeping secrets any longer. Now that we’ve shown them this, we’re past the point of no return.”

Carrie’s mind was struggling to process the implications of the revelation. “So...” She swallowed. “Why are you showing us this?”

Dave seemed to have come to the same realisation. They were both now in dreadful danger. Much more danger than they had been back in the complex. The two edged closer together.

“We have an offer to make,” said the female dandrobian who had

led them in. “We’re tired of this world. We want to wander the stars again. We’ve been confined long enough, and we’ve paid our price a thousand times over. But the Unity won’t listen to us. All they’re interested in is apologies and reparations. They’ve bled us dry. And for what? For a little governance of some primitive worlds. We brought civilisation to the planets we colonised. Most of their sentient species would still be grubbing in the dirt if it weren’t for us. And were they grateful? No. Dictators, they called us. Tyrants. When all we wanted to do was help.

“We’ve had enough. We aren’t prepared to give any more apologies. We want our freedom. We need our freedom. We’re dying here. Suffocating. We’re an intelligent species. We need stimulation. Challenges. We’re rotting here, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. But with your help, we can be free.”

There was a pause. The dandrobians were watching Carrie for her reaction. She tried her best to keep her face expressionless. “And, er, what help do you think I can offer? I’m just—”

“In your report. You’ve seen what the squashpumps did to us. It’s only going to get worse as each species we ruled reaches the stage of development where they can join the Unity. They’re all going to come looking for us and seeking retribution for harms they imagine we caused.” The female stepped closer. “When you complete your report you can recommend the sanctions are lifted for our safety. Your recommendation would carry much weight. You’ve been here during the attacks. You’ve seen it all. A recommendation. It’s all we ask of you.”

Remembering the squashpumps’ message, Carrie knew the ‘attack’ was fake. How the dandrobians had pressured the squashpumps into it she didn’t know yet, but they were clearly trying to play her. In a dandrobian lifetime she wasn’t going to agree to their request, but she couldn’t tell them that, considering the position they were both in. “But you could have asked me this back at the complex. Why have you brought us here?”

“To persuade you,” burst out another dandrobian, with such energy Carrie took a step back.

“No, no, it isn’t what you think,” said the female. “Don’t we keep telling you we don’t mean any harm? We aren’t tyrants, Officer Hatchett. We’re champions of galactic civilisation.” She put her hands together beneath her chin. “We’ve brought you here to offer you...a makeover.”

A silence stretched out as the dandrobians watched them.

“That isn’t what I thought you were going to say,” said Carrie.

“What kind of makeover?” asked Dave slowly.

“Well, anything you like, really darling. Though we’d be happy to



make one or two suggestions if you aren't sure what kind of look you want to go for."

Carrie raised a finger hesitantly. "If I can just get this straight—you're offering my friend and I a haircut, make-up and new clothes in return for my recommendation that your entire species be set free from imprisonment?"

At this, the dandrobians began laughing. They laughed so much they cried, and some had to cling to others to stop themselves from falling to the floor. When their giggles had died away sufficiently for one of them to speak, he said, "No, no my dear. We can do sooo much more than that. We are dandrobians!" He shook his head and wagged a finger. "Surely you've noticed what we're capable of? A world that, from the peak of the highest mountain to the deepest ocean trench, we have transformed for our needs? To be frank, my dear, I'm the teensiest bit insulted. Do you really think all we can provide is a new haircut and a make-up session?"

"No, no, my love." The female stepped close to Carrie, who craned her neck to look up into the alien's face. "No. We can offer you much *much* more."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight – Carrie’s Struggle

THE MALE WHO HAD SPOKEN also moved closer, and the two began to circle Carrie. “Wouldn’t you, for example, like to be a little taller? Wouldn’t you like to change your hair colour to a, let’s say, more pleasing shade? We could make your eyes larger and even them up, straighten and refine your nose, make your face more symmetrical. Did you know you have a few tiny wrinkles already and your skin is losing its lustre?”

A second female approached. “We could pull back those rounded shoulders. And wouldn’t you prefer to be a little bigger here?” She lightly poked one of Carrie’s breasts. “And a little smaller here?” She patted her bottom. “A little thinner all over?”

Carrie flinched and tried to step through the circle the three dandrobians were forming around her. She glanced sideways at Dave, but a dandrobian blocked her view. She opened her mouth to speak, but the leading female held up a hand.

“Don’t answer straightaway. Take some time to think about it. Body modifications are something that should be considered carefully. But have no doubt...” She leaned in until her face was only centimetres from Carrie’s. “...we are experts. We can achieve the very best results.”

“I wasn’t going to give you my decision,” said Carrie.

“Oh?”

“No, I was going to point out a flaw in your plan. If I undergo the body alterations you suggest, my manager will see immediately that I’ve changed, and it’ll be clear that dandrobians did it. If I turn up in an altered body, it’ll show the Transgalactic Council that you’ve been illegally engineering things again.” Her heart rose into her mouth. Maybe she shouldn’t have pointed that out.

“Ohhh.” The dandrobian turned her head and waved a hand dismissively. “Transgalactic Council managers are drawn from the same species, which perceives the world almost entirely through smell. When we’ve finished with you you’ll *smell* exactly the same. Your manager will never notice any alterations, but you certainly shall.” She prodded Carrie’s chest.

Carrie thought back to her first meeting with Gavin, her manager before Errruorerrrrrhch. He had mistaken her for a squashpump, but at the time she had not realised how outrageously wrong he had been. The dandrobians were correct. Neither Gavin nor Errruorerrrrrhch would notice a change in her appearance.

“Don’t you realise, my dear, how much easier your life would be if you were devastatingly attractive? Everyone loves beauty. You’ll have

so many friends, everyone will want to spend time with you or have you work for them, or not work at all. You'll be richer, more successful—everyone will love you. Wouldn't you like that?

The dandrobian stepped back. "But, before you decide, let me show you what we can do."

Carrie had a clear view of the room once more. Dave was gone. "Hey! Where's my friend?"

"Don't worry, the others have whisked him away to show him the wonderful transformations he can undertake."

"No." Carrie clenched her fists. "Take me to Dave right now."

"Calm down, my love. There he is."

A cubicle wall on the other side of the room slid back, revealing her friend. He was looking at a long, high screen like an oversized dressing room mirror. On the screen was an image of a taller, even more attractive Dave.

Carrie called his name, and he turned and gave her a wave before resuming his contemplation of his alternative body and face. She frowned. Why would Dave be tempted by such an offer? He was already attractive. Surely he was satisfied with how he looked?

"This way, darling," trilled a dandrobian, and another cubicle wall slid back.

Unsure of what to do, Carrie followed the dandrobian to the cubicle. She glanced over her shoulder at Dave, who was preoccupied with studying his image. She shook her head.

Two dandrobians awaited her in the cubicle. One rubbed his hands together. "This is my favourite part," he said. Sitting down, he picked up a wire that was lying across a table, and after he had clipped one end of the wire behind his ear, an image flickered to life on the screen.

Carrie winced. The image was like a mirror, reflecting her exact appearance. Her rounded belly bulged out of the front of her too-tight jumpsuit; lumps of fat curved at the tops of her thighs; her hair was a windblown mess; and on her ordinary, average face she had a few pimples.

The dandrobian with the wire said, "Never fear, my darling. There's sooo much we can change. So much!" He turned to look at the screen. Carrie's image grew taller, as tall as a tall human, though not as tall as a dandrobian. The fat on her stomach and thighs melted away, her hair became long and flowing, and her face evened out. The image was still her, but it was the Hollywood version. Film star Carrie smiled, and her teeth were straight and white.

For a long moment ordinary Carrie gazed at beautiful Carrie. Memories of her adolescence came flooding back: the realisation that, even if she learned the mysteries of makeup and other beauty skills

girls her age had been interested in acquiring, she would never look like the models in the magazines; the fear no one would ever find her attractive; and the dread of being singled out as ugly or even just plain. Thoughts of how wonderful it would be to have a perfect body and perfect face formed in her mind. Clothes shop sales assistants would no longer patronise her; people would notice when she entered a room; men would be queueing up for the chance of a date.

The female dandrobian clasped her hands together. "Oh, do say yes. Your friend has already agreed."

Turning, Carrie looked at Dave in the other cubicle. She couldn't believe what she saw. He was nodding and shaking hands with a dandrobian. Dave was agreeing to a whole body makeover? *Dave*? The most good-looking man she had ever seen in real life, who was not only drop-dead gorgeous, but also had perfect taste in clothes. While her brain was trying to process this information her mouth struggled to form words. "B—but."

The female dandrobian was nodding. "Yes, your friend is a fine specimen of a human being, but even he could use some improvement, and he was sensible enough to take us up on our offer. Now, what do you have to say?"

Her mind a haze of confusion, Carrie blurted, "But...it isn't only my Transgalactic Council managers I have to consider. No one back home will recognise me, and I won't be able to go back to my job."

The female shrugged. "When you're beautiful you can get new friends and a new job. Your life will improve in every way. You have simply no idea of the benefits beauty brings."

Carrie clasped her head, but the action did nothing to stop the whirling in her mind. "I'm sorry, I have to think."

A fleeting tension crossed the dandrobian's face, replaced by a charming smile. "Of course." Turning to the others, she said, "Let's withdraw and leave Officer Hatchett to make her decision. If you have any questions, we won't be far away."

The three aliens went out, leaving Carrie alone with the beautiful version of herself still smiling from the screen. Her eyes roved the image longingly once more. How many times had she wished she was taller, thinner, more shapely? That her hair was smooth and flowing, her skin clear, her face beautiful? Plenty of times was the answer, especially since arriving in Dandrobia. And here she was, being offered the opportunity on a plate.

She squeezed her eyes shut and turned away, forcing down the yearning in her heart. If only Dave was here to tell her what a bad idea it was. She needed him to talk some sense into her, like he had the night she had taken Apaté to the pub. But Dave had agreed to the dandrobians' offer. And just when she needed his calm, sensible

approach.

She shook her head. It was no good. She could never agree to recommending the dandrobians be set free. And yet... She peeked again at the beautiful Carrie, and found herself turning around and drawing close to the screen. Her hand reached out to touch the smooth surface and lightly traced the figure's eyes and mouth. The dandrobians were right. It wasn't just a matter of feeling better about herself, being good-looking could make many things in life easier. People warmed to an attractive face. But she couldn't, she mustn't. With a great effort, she turned away from the screen.

If Dave wasn't going to talk some sense into her she would have to do it herself. She held up a finger. *One. What was the squashpumps' message about, and what are Apate and Notos doing on Earth? The dandrobians aren't to be trusted. They mustn't ever leave their planet.* She lifted a second finger. *Two. How can you even think about never seeing your family and friends again just for the sake of being gorgeous?* A third finger joined the others, but an accompanying reason would not come. Carrie's brow wrinkled. Maybe there were only two points? What would Dave say? The Dave that hadn't transformed into some strange, vain creature she did not recognise, that is. The finger wavered a moment, but then she had it. She could hear her friend's voice in her head. *Looks aren't important, Carrie, not when it comes to things that really matter.*

The haze in her mind cleared. Dave had been right, even if he wasn't following his own advice. The dandrobians were beautiful but they were also deceitful and tyrannous. The attractive Carrie on the screen behind her was flawless, but though she looked like her, it was not her, it was someone else. The Carrie she knew, the Carrie she was, was average-looking, short and little bit podgy. Lastly, Dave's inconsistency told her something important. If someone as good-looking as him could see room for improvement, would she ever be content with herself, no matter how beautiful the dandrobians made her? The dandrobians weren't content with their paradise.

She could never agree. But what would they do when she refused their offer?

## Chapter Twenty-Nine – Superhuman Race

PEEKING OUTSIDE THE cubicle, Carrie saw the three dandrobians standing only a short distance away, chatting. Their voices were low, and she couldn't make out what they were saying. She drew her head in.

They would never let her go if she didn't agree to their proposal. She knew too much, and the Transgalactic Council would impose even stricter sanctions when she told them what the dandrobians were up to. What would they do to prevent her from passing on their secret? She swallowed. Her only hope was to get away from them, right now.

She took her translator out of her bag. If she could manage to pronounce Errruorerrrrrhch's name, she could contact her and ask for a gateway out. As a realisation struck her she closed her eyes. It would mean leaving Dave behind. She put the translator away. She would have to get her friend away from his dandrobian makeover artists so they could escape together.

But if she went into the open area the dandrobians would see her. Scanning around, Carrie's gaze alighted on the table. She climbed onto it and grabbed the top of the cubicle wall. Scrambling up, she pulled herself over. She landed softly, allowing her knees to fold under her. She was in another cubicle, empty of dandrobians, but here there was no table to climb onto, and still she couldn't leave in the normal way without being in clear view. She looked at the top of the cubicle wall. It seemed too high for her to leap up and reach, but maybe in the lower gravity...? She had nothing to lose. Starting at the opposite wall, she ran, jumped and clasped the top, using her forward momentum at the last moment to throw her leg up and hook a foot over. After a breathless, silent struggle, she clambered up and slipped down the other side.

Something soft was beneath her when she landed, and it let out a muffled groan. "Dave," she squeaked, sliding quickly off her friend. He was trussed and gagged with fine dandrobian cloth. Pulling a long piece from his mouth, Carrie whispered to him while he worked his mouth so that he could speak. "What happened? Why did they tie you up after you agreed to a makeover?" She frantically undid the knots binding his wrists and ankles.

"I didn't agree to a makeover. What are you talking about?" Dave's voice was barely audible.

"But I saw you."

"Whatever you saw, it wasn't me." He was rotating his hands and feet. He stood and flexed his legs.

"We'll have to talk later," murmured Carrie. "We have to get out of

here now. They'll be back to check on me any second. But we can't go out there." She indicated the open space between the cubicles.

"They'll see us. We have to jump the wall."

"Won't they see that too?"

"Not if they aren't looking this way. And if we're very, very lucky."

Dave assessed the wall's height. "I'll never make it."

"You can. I did, and you're taller than me. It's lower gravity, remember?"

"*Then* what do we do? We're trapped in here."

"Maybe not. I think the doorway's just an illusion. Why would they need a door they could lock? If we can get to it, we might be able to run straight through."

Her friend looked doubtful.

"We have to try. Now, before it's too late," pleaded Carrie.

Dave nodded. Setting his lips, he backed up to the wall, one leg out behind him, and ran at the opposite wall, before springing up and grabbing the top. He tried to hook his knee over, but it slipped and he was left hanging. Carrie ran to him and grasped his feet, pushing him up the extra few inches needed for him to scramble over.

"Hey," a dandrobian shouted. He had been spotted.

There was no point in hiding now. Carrie ran into the central area just as Dave left the cubicle to join her. Together, they pelted down the room, away from the pursuing dandrobians. Carrie feared the athletic aliens would catch them easily, but in the lower gravity she and Dave flew. They reached the end of the room in moments, but Dave turned one way and Carrie the other.

"This way," shouted Dave.

Carrie turned back and followed on the heels of her friend down the narrow space between the cubicles and the wall. After a moment she glanced behind, but the dandrobians were not there. Where had they gone? "Watch out," she called as a cubicle wall just in front slid open and an arm reached out. Dave barrelled through and Carrie ducked under just as the arm's owner appeared.

"Missed them. They're heading towards you," called a voice.

Dave was flying around the corner, and Carrie was right behind him. The wall they were passing looked the same as all the others. Carrie hoped her friend knew where he was going and would see the door's faint outline, because she was lost. Then Dave veered right, and in a blink he was gone. Her heart bounded. She kept her eye on the spot where her friend had vanished as she headed for it, but when she reached the place a male dandrobian stepped out and grabbed her. He lifted her off her feet.

There was no time for anything other than dirty fighting. Hoping male dandrobians were made in the same way as male humans, she

drove her knee between his legs. He dropped her like a hot coal and fell soundlessly to the floor, curling into a foetal position. In a second Carrie was through the illusory wall and out into the open.

“Get on,” called Dave.

Directly outside was a pegasus, and Dave was on its back. Carrie needed no encouragement. Not pausing in her stride, she ran, leapt up, grabbed a handful of mane and prodded the creature's sides with her heels. The animal started forward at a quick trot as the dandrobians emerged from the hill. They grabbed at its tail but the pegasus pulled away. In a moment it was at a canter and moving steadily farther from their pursuers. Carrie gripped tighter as the canter became a gallop. The great wings opened and began to beat the air.

As the distance between them and the dandrobians increased, Carrie's fear began to melt away and her excitement surged. The pegasus' wings beat more strongly, generating blasts of wind that whipped her hair.

“Nooo...” shouted Dave, “stop it.” The animal's hoof beats became lighter against the ground. Then suddenly they were in the air, and the Parthenon, the hill, the trees and fields and shining sea were dropping away below.



## Chapter Thirty – Flight into Danger

“MAKE IT LAND,” SHOUTED Dave. “Make it put us down. We’ve got away from the dandrobians. Carrie, make it stop. We’re going to die.”

“Just hold on tight. We’ll be fine,” Carrie called over her shoulder. She glanced behind and had to stifle a giggle. Dave was chest-downward with his arms wrapped around the pegasus’ broad back, his face white. “Actually, I don’t know how to make it land.”

“What? B—but you said...you were all excited about the flying horses.”

“I was, but I never rode one. I never had the chance. Calm down and enjoy it.” The pegasus had flown high enough for her ears to pop, but the animal didn’t seem intent on going any higher. Dandrobia spread out below them. In the distance was a mountain range and to their left was the sparkling ocean. The landscape was a deep, rich green. There was no sign of the squashpumps’ drying dust as far as she could see. Another subterfuge by the dandrobians. The damage was probably confined to the complex around the receiving hall to be used as evidence to show Transgalactic Council staff.

Carrie frowned. She needed to find out what the dandrobians were up to and tell Errruorerrrrrhch so that she could go back home and find Rogue before he got into danger.

Warm, fresh air flowed past them as the pegasus’ wings carried them steadily on. The creature’s mane was thick and silky in Carrie’s hands, and its fine, long ears were turned backward towards her. Of course! The animal was waiting for her to tell it where to go. Would it understand English? And where should they go? There was only one place that she thought the creature might know.

“I’m going to try something,” she called to Dave. “Hold on.” Gripping the mane tightly, she leaned as far forward as she dared, and said, “Library,” into one of the pegasus’ ears.

The broad white wings spread wide and the animal began to bank and turn, gliding swiftly to a new direction. Carrie’s heart soared.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” called Dave.

To distract her friend from his predicament, Carrie called, “How did you find the pegasus?”

“I didn’t. I didn’t have time. It was right there, like it was waiting for us.”

*Or maybe waiting for me?* Was this the animal she had befriended back at the complex? Had it followed them to the Parthenon?

“And what happened before we escaped?” asked Carrie. “I saw you agreeing to a makeover.”

“I told you, I don’t know what you saw, but it wasn’t me. Why

would I agree to something stupid like that?"

Carrie recalled her own struggle with the decision, and was glad Dave couldn't see the flush that she felt creeping over her face.

"They edged me away from you and started on the spiel," continued her friend. "The second I began to laugh in their faces they gagged and trussed me and threw me in that cubicle. Where you jumped on me."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad you did. But I wish we could get down from here. Did you tell it to go down? Why isn't it landing?"

"I told it to go to the library."

"What? Why? Let's just land and call your manager so we can go home."

"I have to find something to show her about what the dandrobians are doing first."

"No, you don't. Just confess what happened with Apate and Notos. You'll probably get the sack, but, honestly Carrie, this isn't worth it. Get home so you can go and get Rogue."

"I can't, Dave, I just can't. I have to tell Errruorerrrrrh about the dandrobian plot, and I have to find proof. If I don't convince her there's more to it than Apate and Notos, the others might return to invading and tyrannising other worlds. They might all come to Earth. And it would be my fault."

Soon they were flying over the ocean and heading towards the sun, which was lowering. As they came in sight of land, Carrie realised that flying into the complex would expose them to view and place them right back in the hands of the dandrobians. They would need to approach the library from outside and on foot to reduce their chances of being seen.

They flew over the white shore. In the distance was the complex, with the library and meeting hall building a little way outside. Carrie leaned forward to speak into the pegasus' ear once more. "Land." The animal spread its wings and began a gliding descent. In a few minutes its hooves were brushing the grass and wildflowers of the hillside. As it landed it galloped, then cantered, trotted and finally walked to a stop.

Almost before the pegasus halted Dave slid off its back, the look of relief on his face was so pronounced Carrie thought he might actually kiss the ground. She also jumped down. She rubbed the pegasus' nose and tore handfuls of grass to feed to it. The animal snorted and pawed the ground.

"Let's go," said Dave. "It'll be dusk soon." The two humans set off uphill towards the library. "I still think you should call your manager. I mean, you don't even know if the evidence is in the library, and you

said it was locked. How are you going to get in there? If we're seen in the attempt, who knows what the dandrobians will do to us? Do you think the ones back at the engineering lab have sent a message here?"

"I don't know if they can," replied Carrie. "I think communication systems were probably removed from the planet along with whatever else of their technology the Council could find. But the dandrobians will know something's up if they see us because we're back ahead of the others." How were they going to get into the locked room? Like the meeting room, the library had high windows. If they were open, maybe they could jump up to them?

They were nearing a dip in the hillside. In a few minutes they were over its lip and looking into the dark, open mouth of a cave. The sight struck a bell in Carrie's mind. What had Notos told her? Just in time she remembered. "Watch out!" She pushed Dave to the side as he was about to step on a squashpump in the grass. Notos had said the squashpump spaceship not far from the complex, underground where the squashpumps liked to sleep.

"Urgh," said Dave. "It's those slugs again."

"Don't say that." Carrie clutched her bag to her side and moved away from her friend, checking the grass for squashpumps and hoping Dave hadn't been close enough to the translator for it to communicate what he'd said.

"Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett," said the squashpump, "thank goodness y came tae find us. Did ye ken yon message we showed ye? We couldna get tae speak with ye alone afore then. Yon dandrobians kept us apart."

"Yes, I saw it. So you've been forced into all of this? You never wanted to attack Dandrobia? What about what happened to the Foreign Secretary?"

"I dinna know aboot that fer sure, but we think they did a-purpose. They can control the wind, y'know. But I hafta tell something ye afore they see ye. There's some other aliens, some mechanical ones, holding hostages on our home planet. They said they'll kill'em if we dinna do wut they tell us."

*Mechanical aliens?* There was only one kind of mechanical alien Carrie knew: placktoids. The dandrobian plot reached farther than she'd thought. Right across the galaxy. If the dandrobians were in league with the placktoids, it was more important than ever that she find out what they were up to.

She dropped to her knees by the rainbow-tentacled squashpump. "I'll do everything I can to free the hostages, but I need to do something, and I think you can help us."

## Chapter Thirty-One – Deceptive Appearances

THE SQUASHPUMP CARRIE and Dave had stumbled across was not as proud as the Foreign Secretary, and consented to be carried to the library to save time. The meeting room door was open, but the internal door was, as she'd expected, locked. It was a simple lock, however, as the dandrobians would be expected to have under the Unity's sanctions. There was a small keyhole in the door.

"Are you sure it can fit in there?" asked Dave as Carrie placed the squashpump next to the hole.

"Of course it can. You saw the gaps they squeezed through in the party room."

"I'll see wut I can do," said the alien as it slid inside. It must have negotiated the lock quickly because part of it was still protruding when there was a click. Her heart in her mouth, Carrie pushed the door and it swung open. At last they were going to find out what the dandrobian's plan was.

"I canna stay long," said the squashpump as it slithered down the open door. "I mustna be found. Yon mechanical aliens have three and half thousand of ma bairns hostage."

Carrie stepped into the room. It was dim. The rays of the setting sun through the high windows were the only source of light. But the lack of light didn't matter. She could see what she needed to see. The large room was completely bare. There were no books, files, plans or any other documents. For a moment she could not speak.

"Looks like you're out of luck," said Dave. "Sorry."

"I don't understand. Why would they lock the door if there's nothing here?" She rubbed the back of her neck. "I don't believe it."

"Maybe there was something here, but they moved everything out when you said you wanted to look inside."

"Damn." Why hadn't she kept her big mouth shut? Why had she expressed interest in the library? She'd been acting like she was on holiday, and now she was paying the price. She groaned. "What am I going to do?"

"You'll never find anything now. You're just going to have to call your manager and go home."

"I can't. I won't. There has to be something I can show her." Carrie looked around the bare walls again and frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's wrong with this room."

Dave also looked about. "It seems pretty ordinary to me. Looks like any other ancient Greek architecture."

She touched the plain, unadorned surface. Carrie's eyes widened.

“No, it doesn’t. Or rather, yes it does. It looks like the two-or three-thousand-year-old buildings we see on Earth today. The buildings that the elements and time have worn to plain marble. But they weren’t like that when they were new. They were bright and colourful, like all the other buildings here. The dandrobians love colour. But look at this place. It’s plain. Why did they make it like this?”

Dave shrugged. “Maybe because it’s only for storing documents. There’s no point in decorating it.”

But Carrie knew the dandrobians better than her friend. Pragmatism was not one of their stronger traits. “No, there’s a reason.”

“There’s a wee dip here,” said the squashpump, making Carrie jump a little. She had forgotten it was still there. It had climbed up the wall while they were talking. As the creature moved away from the dip it had mentioned, she could make out its shape. It was shell-like, and grooved...and familiar. In a flash she had it. One of the first things she’d noticed when she arrived in Dandrobia. And what had Notos said when she asked to borrow one at the beach? That only dandrobians could wear them.

“What is it? Spit it out,” said Dave, watching her expression.

“This.” She touched the dip. “It’s in the shape of the clasp they all use to fasten their clothes. Notos wouldn’t let me have one, and that depression would fit one exactly. Why’s it there? Maybe something happens if you put a dandrobian clasp in it.”

“You mean those golden brooches Apaté and Notos were wearing?”

“Yes, but...oh damn.” Her elation faded. “We don’t have one.”

“Well...” Dave gave a little cough and his face turned pink. He reached into his pocket.

“You haven’t...?”

There it was. In her friend’s hand lay a dandrobian clasp.

“I...er...” muttered Dave, “Apaté left it on the table when she—” His breath was knocked out of his lungs as Carrie threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely.

“My lovely kleptomaniac friend,” she exclaimed as she let go and grabbed the clasp from his hand. “Let’s see what it does.” She placed it in the depression, and it remained there when she took her hand away. She held her breath.

At first, nothing happened. Then the change was almost too imperceptible to see. The wall, floor and ceiling seemed to sparkle faintly in the last rays of the sun. Then the glimmers took shape, and delicate lines appeared, tracing over the room’s interior, linking star shapes that were surrounded by tiny, vividly coloured dots. Carrie’s hand went to her mouth as she walked to the centre of the room. She

slowly revolved, taking in the web of lines traced over the entire interior. As she completed her circle, she said to her friend, "It's something, but what?"

"Tis a galactic map." The squashpump's voice piped in her mind. "And a plan. Look o'er there. That's where the lines begin." One of the creature's tentacles was straight and pointed towards a nearby area of wall.

Carrie and Dave went over and peered at the spot. It seemed the squashpump was correct. Many of the lines led to a blue-green dot, the third of eight circling the small star. Carrie gasped. "It's Earth." She turned wide eyes to Dave. "It's an invasion plan, starting with us."

She fumbled in her bag, and drew out the translator.

"Errruorerrrrrh. Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrh." Silence. "Oh for goodness sake.

Errruorerrrrrh, come in, come in. Answer me. Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager Errruorerrrrrh." She shook the translator. She felt like banging it on the wall, but restrained herself. "Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager ErrruorerrrrrhCH." A spray of saliva shot from her mouth.

"Carrie?"

She nearly dropped the translator in surprise. The voice that came from it was not that of her female Transgalactic Manager, but it was a familiar one. It was the voice of the only manager at the Transgalactic Council who called her by her first name. "G—Gavin?"

## Chapter Thirty-Two – Surprise Arrival

“IT IS INDEED I, CARRIE. I apologise for any confusion this may cause you. I am now receiving communications from you to your previous manager.”

“Gavin, it’s great to hear your voice.”

“It is also pleasant to resume contact with you. My superiors have assigned me to oversee further developments in the reconciliation process you are facilitating because certain matters came to light during my investigations of the placktoids that indicated the involvement of the dandrobians.”

“That’s right,” exclaimed Carrie. “The placktoids are in league with them. They’re holding squashpumps hostage on their home planet and are forcing them to pretend to attack the dandrobians.”

A clicking sound came through the translator. “That is interesting and extremely useful information. Is there anything else you have to report?”

“Well, can you see through my translator?”

“Point it towards whatever you wish me to see. I am recording.”

Carrie and Dave moved to the doorway, and Carrie pointed the translator into the room, scanning slowly across the floor, walls and ceiling, which shimmered with translucent silvery lines. The sound of Gavin clicking came from the device. “Extremely interesting,” said the Transglactic Council Manager. “It appears to be—”

“It’s an invasion plan, right?” said Carrie. “Starting with Earth.”

“Your conclusion is somewhat premature. We must complete a thorough analysis, but it is certainly highly suspicious. How did you come across this map?”

After quickly explaining about the locked but apparently empty room, she said, “I’m so glad you’re back as my manager, Gavin. Errruorerrrrrh wasn’t easy to work with.”

“Oh...ah...em.” For once Carrie’s insectoid boss seemed to be lost for words.

“Gavin?”

“If my colleague’s behaviour towards you failed to meet the expected standard of professionalism, I should apologise, perhaps. Her attitude may have been influenced by...well...she may have allowed her personal feelings to intrude upon...”

Carrie turned puzzled eyes to Dave. She hadn’t particularly associated Gavin or Errruorerrrrrhch with strong emotions, and Errruorerrrrrhch had only met her recently. “Why would Errruorerrrrrh feel anything about me? She’s only known me a few days.”

“Errruorerrrrrhch’s feelings are not concerned with you, Carrie.”

“Then who?” Her eyebrows lifted. “You?”

“Your former manager has expressed a high level of displeasure with me...in certain personal matters...certain relationship matters...that I would rather not discuss.”

Carrie’s eyebrows lifted higher. “Were you two together? Did you...did you dump her?”

Gavin didn’t answer for a moment, then, “Perhaps it would have been better if I had. Unfortunately, in matters of the cingulate gyrus, hippocampus, amygdala and other central nervous system structures...”

Carrie stifled a giggle. “Don’t tell me you cheated on her.” This was a side of Gavin she had not expected to see. Was her manager a philanderer? His stories of being constantly moved on from previous Transgalactic Council jobs, which he’d always refused to explain, was starting to make sense. “So she hated me because you’d been my manager, and my revealing the placktoid threat had made you look good...”

“If she was a little exacting and harsh towards you, that may have been the cause.”

Carrie wondered if Errruorerrrrrhch had withheld information from her about the squashpumps and other important facts in order to make her, and by extension, Gavin, look stupid.

Her relief at finding herself once more working with a manager who had faith in her abilities gave Carrie courage to explain about Apaté and Notos’ escape to Earth. Gavin whirred and clicked as he considered the situation. “That is extremely unfortunate. Two escaped dandrobians are an imminent threat to the Unity and the civilised regions of the galaxy. I have noted the information, and the Council will dispatch officers to locate and return the fugitives at the earliest opportunity.

“But, Carrie, your continuing service is required on this case. The placktoid’s reach stretches farther than we had imagined. I assume I can rely on your continued commitment?”

Her heart rose. Continue working with the Transgalactic Council to fight the placktoid threat to the galaxy? “Yes, absolutely!”

“Ye seem to have everything you needed, so I’m off,” said the squashpump, startling Carrie again. The creature began sliding away. “Good luck.”

“Thanks for your help,” said Carrie. “Hold on, wait a minute,” She closed the door to the ‘library’. “Please lock this before you go, so the dandrobians don’t know their plan’s been revealed.”

After doing as Carrie requested, the squashpump glided towards the exit. “Please, will ye do something soon tae help us. I canna sleep



for worry about ma bairns.”

“Yes, of course. The Council and the Unity will do everything they can.” As the creature disappeared through the door, Carrie spoke into the translator. “Gavin, can you open a gateway to take us home? I’m worried sick about Rogue. He ran into the street just before I left. I know he’ll probably come straight back, but I have to go home and make—”

“Get oot noo, they’re coming!” The squashpump had returned. Dandrobian voices could be heard from outside.

“Quickly, please, Gavin,” said Carrie.

“I am opening a gateway now, though I note you said ‘us’ and not ‘I’. May I remind you—” Green mist began to swirl in the corner of the room. “—that your friend, whom I assume has accompanied you once more, is not authorised—” The dandrobians’ voices grew louder. “—to travel via—”

“I know, Gavin, I know. Oh, please get us home.” The mist had thickened and began to swirl. Surely the Transgalactic Council could invent a faster transportation method? Carrie pushed Dave towards the green spiral. It sounded as though the dandrobians were nearly at the door. Dave disappeared headfirst, and Carrie dived after him, hoping the aliens entering the room wouldn’t see her vanishing feet.

On the other side, she crashed into Dave and immediately grabbed her nose. There was a dreadful stink. “Dave, did you...” Her words faded. She was not in her familiar kitchen at home. She was in a small steel cubicle, which was shuddering and rocking.

“Get off me,” said Dave, pushing at her. “Where the hell has Gavin sent us?”

Carrie stood, grabbing a steel bar on the wall as the room lurched. All around was the sound of rushing motion. They were in the cramped, smelly toilet of a fast-moving train.

## Chapter Thirty-Three – Rogue’s Rescue

THE DOOR OPENED WAS opened by a man in a business suit. His mouth fell open, and he hastily slammed the door shut again.

Dave struggled to his feet. “Great, just great. Gavin got his coordinates wrong. God knows where we’re on our way to. Thank goodness he didn’t put us under the train.”

Fear replaced Carrie’s shock, clutching at her heart and banishing concerns about how they had ended up there. “We have to get off. I have to get home. Rogue’s going to get away.” She threw open the door and bowled over the waiting businessman as she ran into the nearest carriage. “Please,” she said to a woman sitting with a young child. “Where’s this train going? What’s the next stop?”

“Birmingham New Street,” replied the woman, placing an arm around her child and drawing it closer.

“Birmingham,” blurted Carrie, turning to Dave, who had followed her. “We’re on our way to Birmingham. It’ll take hours to get home. Hours.” Her chin trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t worry,” said Dave. “He’s got his tag on, hasn’t he? With your phone number? Even if he does go wandering off, someone’s bound to catch him and call you.”

The train was packed, and Carrie and Dave were forced to stand in the corridor next to the businessman who had surprised them in the toilet. The man opened a newspaper and held it in front of his face, every so often lowering it and peering at them over the top. Carrie clutched her phone, ready to answer it the minute there was a call. She stared bleakly out the window at the British countryside rushing past. Dave tried to engage her in conversation about how they had ended up on the train, but she couldn’t say a word. At Birmingham, they changed trains, catching the next service back to Northampton.

No call came for Carrie in all the time it took them to return to her flat. As soon as the taxi drew up outside the building, she leapt out and ran down the street, calling Rogue’s name. When she didn’t see him anywhere down one end of the street, she ran down the other end, shouting the whole time. She was about to try the adjoining streets when she noticed her phone was ringing. It was Dave. “Hello?” she answered breathlessly. “Have you found him?”

“He’s here, Carrie. At your flat. I think he’s been here all along. You better get back, quickly.”

“Is he hurt? What’s wrong?” She was already running, teary-eyed.

“He isn’t hurt, don’t worry. But someone might be if you don’t get back here soon.” She barely heard his final sentence. He’d said her dog wasn’t hurt. Everything was going to be okay. As she entered the

building, she heard Rogue barking and growling above. Climbing the stairs, she saw Dave standing outside the door to her flat. His arms were folded and he was wearing a bemused look.

"I'm glad you've arrived," he said. "He won't take any notice of me."

The door to her flat was open, and Rogue was in the doorway, his body stiff and his tail erect. Cowering just inside the flat were Apaté and Notos.

"Make your horrible animal stop. We'll go back, we promise," said Apaté. "Oh, please make it stop."

"Rogue, come here." The dog immediately ran to meet Carrie as she reached the top of the stairs, and he leapt up to lick her face. As Apaté set a foot outside the flat, however, Rogue gave a loud bark. She quickly withdrew it.

"Please arrange a gateway to Dandrobia," said Notos. "We've learned our lesson. We'll go quietly."

"You two aren't going anywhere, not for a little while anyway," said Carrie.

"What?" said Dave.

Carrie motioned everyone inside and closed the door. Rogue ran to his water bowl and began slurping. He must have been barking and growling for hours, for all the time it took them to get home. But before she sent the dandrobians back to their home planet, Carrie wanted some answers. She made the aliens go into her living room and sit down on the sofa. Standing in front of them, her hands on her hips, she said, "Tell me, what did you do?"

"What does it matter, darling? We're very sorry and we promise we won't try to escape again."

"Cut the crap," said Carrie.

Apaté and Notos exchanged glances. The male dandrobian lowered his head. "I left your home but Apaté remained, hiding in your bedroom. I didn't make it far before your animal caught up with me, and forced me to return."

"That isn't what I meant. When Dave and I were returned to Earth, we ended up on a train to Birmingham. My guess is it was the same train we took down to London, and one of you two did something to it while you were alone in the toilet. Something that confused the Transgalactic Council coordinates." She rubbed her chin. "And that's why you stayed here, too, isn't it? Why you never left even though you easily could, and why you tried to confuse us into thinking you had left, so that we'd run after you and leave Apaté here alone. It's something to do with gateway entrances."

The two dandrobians did not answer. Apaté's eyes were hooded, and Notos' expression was uncharacteristically grim. Rogue returned

from his water bowl and gave a sharp bark. Both dandrobians flinched.

Carrie was about to pursue questioning the dandrobians while they were still in fear of her dog, but she changed her mind. Too many questions might alert them to how much she knew, and that maybe the Transgalactic Council knew of their invasion plan. Better to keep them in ignorance. She drew out her translator. "Gavin, I have two dandrobians here, very keen to return home."

Gavin answered immediately. "I am exceedingly pleased to hear that. Well done, Carrie. Standby."

"Oh, and one more thing," Carrie added. "I need a bigger uniform."

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CARRIE EXHALED AND slumped into a chair as Notos followed Apaté through the cupboard underneath her kitchen sink. The door swung closed and the green light faded. She didn't know what would happen to the two dandrobians when they arrived back in their prison paradise, and for the moment she didn't care. She stretched and rubbed her neck. She had been on an ocean voyage, turned down the opportunity of a lifetime, taken a ride on a flying horse, and exposed another element in the placktoid conspiracy, and it wasn't even midday.

"Have some tea," said Dave, placing a steaming mug in front of her.

"What a good idea." She reached for the sugar bowl, and added a spoonful of sugar to the mug. She was about to take another spoonful but changed her mind. She sighed and stirred her drink.

"Biscuit?" Dave lifted the lid from her biscuit tin.

"No, better not," said Carrie, patting her stomach.

Her friend looked inside the tin. "Oh." He replaced the lid.

"You've eaten them all, haven't you?"

"I don't think so. I thought I left at least one or two."

Carrie rolled her eyes. A thought struck her, and she began looking around the kitchen, taking a mental inventory.

"What are you looking for?" asked Dave.

"Nothing." Carrie continued to swivel her head round.

Dave tutted. "I haven't taken anything."

Carrie redirected her attention to her tea. "I didn't think you had."

"Huh!"

Carrie rubbed her eyes. She frowned. "Those dandrobians must have been pretty keen on convincing me they were under threat. They

let the squashpumps invade their brains. You should have seen it. It was terrible.”

“Maybe they had volunteers, or maybe it was all fake, like the fake me you saw agreeing to the makeover.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I’ll ask Gavin later. He might know more by then.”

“So you’re carrying on with it then?”

“The Transgalactic Council job? Of course.”

“Seems a bit dangerous to me. I mean, travelling across the galaxy, fighting with dangerous aliens, flying around hundreds of metres above the ground?” He gave a shudder. “You wouldn’t catch me doing it.”

“Dave, you just did all those things.”

Her friend paused, his mug at his lips. He grinned sheepishly. “Oh, yeah.” He took a sip. “Well, you won’t catch me doing anything else risky like that again.”

Carrie had other ideas, but she was keeping quiet about them for now. She stole a glance out of the corner of her eye. Her silver salt cellar seemed to have gone missing.



## Chapter One – Carrie the Maverick

Carrie Hatchett silently wished she had put on her thermal underwear. She had been crouching for hours in a cold, damp, trench dug by Unity troops, while the siege of the squashpump city dragged on.

‘City’ was a loose word to describe the squashpump municipality. It was in fact a massive mound of moist, brown organic matter on a bare, boggy plain. Try as she might, Carrie couldn’t help but see it as a huge manure pile and the squashpumps as large, intelligent, civilised slugs.

“Ma bairns, ma bairns.” Nearby—close enough for Carrie’s translator to pick up its squeaks and transform them into Scottish-accented English in her mind—a squashpump official sat, or lay. At the beginning of the negotiations several days earlier, this squashpump, who went by the name of MacDougal, had been calm and professional, but over time it had weakened under stress and concern for its family. According to official estimates, roughly 236,000 squashpumps were being held hostage by the placktoids, a mechanical alien species intent on taking over the galaxy.

Wincing as she moved her cramped muscles, Carrie went over to the distressed squashpump and sat beside it. “I’m sure there’ll be some progress soon. We’ll get your children out. How many do you have?”

The squashpump reared up, lifting its upper end five or six centimetres off the ground, and sprouted multi-coloured soft tentacles. “One thousand and seventy-eight, give or take one or two. I can ne’er keep count of the wee rascals. Oh, and three hundred and twelve eggs.” Its tentacles flopped. “What’s t’ become o’ them?”

“One thousand and seventy-eight? That is a large family.” Carrie tried to imagine what it must be like to be a parent to so many offspring. “We haven’t heard from the placktoids for a while. They must be about to agree to surrender. With Unity or Transgalactic Council presence on every habitable planet across the galaxy, they don’t have anywhere to go. They might be hostile, but they aren’t stupid.”

“Och, that’s what I mean. It’s taking too long. Yon evil machines are trying t’ figure a way oot. They’ve a trick or two up their sleeves yet, I warn ye.”

Carrie rubbed her chilled arms and blew into her hands.

MacDougal was right. The placktoids were extremely devious. When she had been the first to uncover their illegal activities, they had fooled the Council into believing they were the victims in a dispute with the yellow liquid known as the ootoon, when in fact they had been the aggressors. But their latest plan of invading the squashpump planet had failed. Unity soldiers had driven them from every area to this final refuge. Surely they had no way out? They had no alternative but to surrender.

“How are the tunnels coming along? They must be nearly finished now,” Carrie asked MacDougal.

“This evening, they say.”

“I’ll go and see if there have been any developments,” Carrie said, hoping to find some news to calm the anxious squashpump. MacDougal collapsed limply to the ground as she left.

Not far down the trench, she found her Transgalactic Council Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager, Gavin, speaking to some Unity soldiers. In their combat gear and helmets with opaque visors, Carrie found the soldiers creepy. Not because they were alien—some were human, or at least humanoid—but their uniforms took on the appearance of their surroundings, like chameleons, which made them hard to spot. She was sure one or two of them had deliberately snuck up on her to make her jump.

She waited while her huge insectoid manager finished his conversation. A cold wind circulated, and she hugged herself, looking up into the thick, grey clouds that constantly covered the sky. After a few moments the soldiers nodded at her and went away. “Any news, Gavin?”

“I am afraid we have received no further communications from the placktoids since their most recent expression of defiance. The general consensus seems to be that positive action is required.”

“What kind of positive action? Not an assault?”

“Probably, yes.”

Carrie gasped. “But there are hundreds of thousands of squashpumps in there, and they’re so small. How will the soldiers be able to avoid hitting them? Can’t we wait until the squashpumps have finished digging the tunnels? At least then we can sneak up on them.”

“We cannot afford to wait, unfortunately. We have not heard from a single hostage since this morning, and the placktoids are fully aware of the squashpumps’ ability to tunnel quickly and efficiently. They know we would not use tunnelling machines because they would detect the vibrations, but that the squashpumps will dig tunnels manually to allow troops to approach the city. We are sure they can also estimate the time it would take and know the tunnels will be completed soon. A crisis point is approaching and we must be



decisive.”

Carrie bit her lip. On her previous assignment she had been in charge of negotiations between the squashpumps and the former tyrants of the galaxy, the dandrobians. While on Dandrobia the squashpump delegation had attacked the dandrobians, and it had taken Carrie too long to discover the real reason—that the placktoids were forcing them to by holding their families hostage on their home planet, and that the dandrobians had been in on the plot from the very beginning, for reasons no one yet understood.

“I wish I’d spoken to the squashpump delegation earlier and not allowed myself to be hoodwinked by the dandrobians, Gavin. I feel like this is partly my fault. We might have had more time to act against the placktoids and avoided this whole situation.”

“Your feelings of guilt are irrational and non-beneficial. Please focus on the matter at hand.”

But Gavin’s news about the proposed assault was not what she wanted to take back to MacDougal. “There must be something else we can do. Can’t we allow some of the placktoids’ demands? Can’t we just confine them to their planet, like we did with the dandrobians?”

“The placktoids’ ability to create transgalactic gateways makes this impossible. We must be certain no placktoid can escape. It is confinement within the ootoon or nothing.”

The mysterious, yellow ootoon, through which transgalactic gateways would not operate. Carrie well understood the placktoids’ refusal to give up their only bargaining tool, the squashpump hostages. Living in air pockets within the ootoon for the foreseeable future was not a fate she would resign herself to easily, either. Her heart sank. When it came down to it, a violent end to the siege seemed inevitable. But she could not, would not, allow squashpumps to come to harm. “Gavin, we can’t just let the Unity storm the compost, I mean city. We have to do something. *I* have to do something.”

“I appreciate that you are concerned about squashpump safety. Such a sentiment is natural and admirable. But you must understand you are only one Transgalactic Council Officer within a large team of Council and Unity staff. You cannot and must not act as an individual in this matter. We must all obey the joint decisions made, for our own safety and that of the squashpumps.”

“But I’ve had personal experience of dealing with the placktoids. I know them. I’m sure if I could speak to them face-to-face I could reason with them.” Though Carrie had been the one to expose the mechanical aliens’ devious plot, she hadn’t been allowed much input into the negotiation process. This was probably because the Council was aware that taking part in long, detailed discussions was not one of

her strengths, but being excluded annoyed her, and she was tired of sitting on the sidelines, distant from the action. She itched to take part and be useful.

“A face-to-face meeting would be far too dangerous,” Gavin replied, “even if you were to possess the authority, which you do not. Please do not even consider such an action. It would be suicide to leave this protected position, and in the event that you did survive to approach the placktoid commander, you could seriously destabilise the negotiation process.”

Carrie clenched her fists at her sides. “The negotiation process is going to be seriously destabilised the moment those troops storm the manure pile. I mean city. There are squashpump babies and eggs in there. Goodness knows what the placktoids will do when the Unity starts to attack.”

“It is precisely to protect the squashpumps that the Unity must attack, and soon.”

Frowning at her ten-legged, bronze-carapaced manager, Carrie struggled for an answer, but she couldn't think of a suitable response. She stalked away without a word. There had to be a better way than a frontal assault. There had to be. Avoiding returning to MacDougal, she went in the other direction, towards the area where the squashpumps were constructing tunnels for the Unity soldiers.

Scanning the ground for squashpump workers, she approached a tunnel entrance. The squashpumps had created a chain to shift the earth from the tunnel, and on the far side was a great mound of excavated soil. As Carrie approached, the chain broke up, and the squashpumps began undulating and hooting. “We're there,” they shouted. “We've reached the city.”

A thought struck Carrie, and she made her decision quickly.

## Chapter Two – Going AWOL

SURE THAT THE SQUASHPUMPS would soon report her to a Council or Unity official, Carrie sped down the tunnel. It was narrow and stuffy, barely wide enough for a human to pass through. Light from the entrance grew dim as she went deeper, and she took out the small torch she carried in her Transgalactic Council Officer toolbox: a large handbag filled with handy devices. She shone the torch ahead. The tunnel's damp walls glistened in its beam, and water dripped from the ceiling. With a trembling heart, she hoped the squashpumps had made the tunnel safe from collapse. She was getting the feeling she always got when she did something impulsive—a nagging sense of regret. At least, she hoped she would live to regret her decision.

It was warmer underground than on the surface. The air was still and moist. As she went on, the tunnel walls began to close in even more. Soon, Carrie was stooping. Her neck began to hurt. To take her mind off the dull ache and her fear that she would die alone, entombed underground on an alien planet, she tried to think what she would say to the placktoids when she arrived at the squashpump city. She shook her head and hoisted her bag higher on her shoulder.

Recalling her first encounter with the mechanical aliens, she mentally went through the different types and their roles. The placktoids, bizarrely, resembled office stationery that was common across Earth. A fact that—Carrie swallowed—meant they harboured a particular hatred for humans, who they saw apparently enslaving and maltreating their distant cousins in Earth TV transmissions shown throughout the galaxy. With a sinking heart, she realised that, as a human, she was perhaps the last Officer who should be negotiating with them face-to-face.

The main placktoid types she could remember were the ones that resembled paperclips and the massive shredders. Staple removers, staplers and ballpoint pens were some of the other kinds, but she had only seen them moving around boxes of stolen oootoon. The paperclips, on the other hand, seemed to be responsible for ship-to-surface transportation, though Carrie had also encountered smaller versions that attacked viciously. It was the shredders she had to worry about, however. They were the coordinators and commanders. No doubt there would be at least one shredder in charge of the situation ahead. A fiery anger rose up in Carrie at the memory of the shredder that had nearly killed her best friend, Dave. She took a deep breath and exhaled. She needed to stay calm if she was going to succeed in persuading the placktoids to give up the hostages and surrender peacefully.

“Carrie, Carrie, please answer immediately.”

She jumped, startled by the voice coming from her translator. It was Gavin. News must have got back to him about what she was doing.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, respond at once.”

She winced. Her Manager knew she hated it when he called her that. She took out the translator. There was no point in talking to him. He would only tell her to go back, and she wasn’t going to do that. No squashpumps were going to die if she could help it. But if she answered Gavin she would have to directly defy him.

“Officer Hatchett, answer me. Do not turn off your translator.” He knew her too well. “I repeat, do not—”

Releasing the operating button on the translator, Carrie replaced it in her bag. She would need to turn it on again to speak to the placktoids and avoid hearing the piercing off-key music that was the language they used with other species, but for the time being she could escape Gavin’s commands. Sweat trickled down the side of her face, due to either increasing temperatures or her racing heart. She pulled down the zip on her jumpsuit and wondered how much farther she had to go. She must be nearly underneath the city by now. Her chest tightened as she realised she had no idea where the tunnel led to. Was it right under the placktoid headquarters or on the outskirts? If she couldn’t see any placktoids when she emerged, how would she find them? And if she popped up right in front of them, would they attack on sight?

Carrie stopped and, her hands shaking slightly, opened her Transgalactic Officer toolbox. She riffled through the contents. She had never really taken a proper inventory of the devices at her disposal. There didn’t seem to be any weapons in there. She sighed. She wouldn’t have known how to use them anyway. Careful preparation had never been one of her strengths. Pushing her sleeves up to her elbows, she concluded that she could rely only on her skills as a Bagua Zhang master if it came to a fight.

The end of the tunnel reared up, and she had to stop abruptly to prevent herself from bumping into it. Scanning round with the torch, she confirmed she was at a dead end. Above, the ceiling looked the same as the rest of the tunnel except for some old, dead roots poking through, but Carrie was sure the squashpumps’ calculations were correct and only a few centimetres of soil separated her from the city, and the invading placktoids, overhead.

Holding the torch between her teeth, she began grabbing and tearing down handfuls of moist earth. She worked quickly but quietly, unsure what technology the placktoids might have to detect sound or

movement. Crumbs of soil fell onto her face and hair, and she blinked and shook them off. Then her right hand grasped at nothing but air, and light shone from above. She had reached the surface.

She squatted down and turned off the torch before putting it away. There wasn't much light from the squashpump chamber above, but there was enough to see by. All was quiet except for her heart, which thumped in her ears. Carrie pulled down more clods, creating a hole large enough for her head and shoulders. Now she could see another ceiling above, which held the source of the light. Emitting a pale blue glow, it was coated in some kind of lichen or fungus.

An object crossed her field of vision. Carrie stepped back. The object had been moving too quickly for her to identify it. Had it been a placktoid, or a springing squashpump? Though slug-like, the squashpumps could move quickly if necessary. There was another movement, and another. Squinting, Carrie tried to follow the objects, but they were moving too fast. There was nothing for it, she would have to take a chance and climb up. She decided to leap up, so that if there were placktoids in the room, at least she would have the element of surprise.

Carrie bent her knees, and launched herself upwards, throwing her top half across the floor of the space above. She slid backwards into the tunnel, the hole's edges crumbling around her, but she managed to get her knee up and onto the floor. A sharp object hit her in the face, and another hit the back of her hand. "Ow!" She closed her eyes just in time as another impacted her eyelid. "Ouch." After scrambling a short distance on hands and knees, Carrie sat up and covered her face with her hands. She was being hit on all sides by small, thin pieces of metal.

Peeking between her fingers, she confirmed her suspicion: she was being attacked by small placktoids, 'baby' paperclips the mechanical aliens had developed as part of their plan to reproduce in enough numbers to take over the galaxy. She inhaled sharply as a paperclip hit the sensitive skin between her thumb and forefinger. Peeking again, she saw her escape route through the mass of swarming, vicious miniature placktoids. In the corner of the rounded room was a hole, a dark exit.

Cringing from the attack, she crawled slowly towards the hole, unable to stand due to the placktoid onslaught. But as she neared the way out the paperclips redoubled their efforts, until it felt like she was in a swarm of stinging wasps. Gasping in pain, Carrie scrambled back to her original position. The intensity of the attack reduced enough for her to take a peek again. The baby placktoids were definitely concentrated around the hole. They were trying to prevent her from leaving. But why? Were the placktoids in the process of destroying

squashpumps before the Unity forces closed in?

Carrie set her jaw. These annoying little mechanical aliens were not going to stop her from doing whatever she could to save the squashpumps. There might be lots of them, but she knew their weakness. When she had first fought them on the placktoid starship she had discovered they needed light to energise them.

Eyes squeezed shut, she jumped up and dug her fingers into the fungus growing on the ceiling. It was spongy and soft and yielded easily. Before long, she had pulled more than half of it away from the roof and put it face down on the floor so that only its dark, non-luminescent, earthy roots were showing. She was sure she felt fewer stings. She risked another look. The chamber was quite dim now. The placktoids seemed to be struggling to fly. With one eye on the exit, she grabbed at the remaining pieces of fungus, plunging the chamber into darkness.

She shuffled forwards, holding her hands out in front of her, until she found the wall. Feeling downwards, she soon located the hole. As soon as she was out, she scanned the area for signs of placktoids. The mound's interior was dingy and warren-like. There was no sign of any squashpumps or their eggs. All she could see clearly was a single light in the distance. A green light. It was only a faint trace of glowing mist, but Carrie's heart sank at the sight of it. The placktoids had escaped. They had disappeared through a transgalactic gateway.

## Chapter Three – Carrie's Comeuppance

NEVER BEFORE HAD CARRIE seen Gavin's razor-sharp inner mandibles at such close quarters. They filled her vision, glistening with mucus, and she struggled to concentrate on what he was saying. She caught the words irresponsible, reckless, impulsive and idiotic. She thought the last one was a little harsh. Of all the Transgalactic Council staff, she had the most experience of dealing with the deceptions of the placktoids. That was why they had asked her along. Only they had never given her a chance to use her knowledge. Maybe if she'd arrived in the squashpump mound a little sooner—

"Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, did you hear what I said?"

Shuffling a little to the side so that she could look at Gavin's hundred or so eyes, which were slightly less unnerving than his mouth, Carrie replied, "Yes, every word."

"Good, please remain where you are. Your guard is approaching."

"Wh-what? My guard?" Carrie's mouth went dry and her knees weakened.

Gavin chittered. "As I have already informed you, you are under arrest until your return to Earth. Transgalactic gateway use is prohibited while the Council tries to determine the route the placktoids followed. When we know their destination we can begin to use gateways once more—"

"Wait, wait. What was that you said about me being under arrest?"

Her manager did not answer. He reared up until he was standing on only his hind pair of legs while the other nine pairs beat the air. Carrie could smell roses, sweet and musky. Gavin was exuding pheromones, the language of his species. He seemed to have temporarily lost the power to communicate in English. Pair by pair, his legs dropped to the ground, and a quiver ran up the insectoid alien from the tip of his tail to the ends of his antennae. After another pause, he spoke. "I apologise for my outburst, but your attitude is, at times, extremely trying, Officer Hatchett."

"I repeat, your unilateral action in entering the squashpump metropolis in an attempt to negotiate with the placktoids on an individual basis indicates that you are a danger to not only yourself but also to innocent civilians and Council and Unity staff. You are under arrest. Please wait here. The Council currently has more important matters to address."

"But—"

He left without listening to her protest.

"But I was only trying to help," Carrie exclaimed, to no one.

Arrested? Her muscles grew rigid. Arrested? After her act of bravery? Outrage and anger surged through her for a moment, but then events of the long day caught up to her, and she slumped down in the trench and wiped dirt from her face, grimacing at the stinging of hundreds of tiny cuts the baby paperclips had inflicted. A sullen resentment formed in her stomach. *She* had been the one who'd seen the signature remains of the green mist that had informed the Council how the placktoids had left the planet. *She* had been the one who had been prepared to risk her life to save the squashpumps. *They* had been going to attack without caring what the placktoids might do in retaliation.

"Stand up," said a voice at her side.

Startled, Carrie looked up to see a Unity soldier framed against the sky, though his helmet and uniform were quickly turning deep grey to match the clouds overhead. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "Geez, you guys. How do you do that?"

In answer, the soldier bent and roughly grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"Ow, all right, all right. I'm standing up."

Tugging her arms to her front, the soldier fixed restraints around her wrists before bending and locking similar devices around her ankles. He stood to one side, legs akimbo, while his uniform slowly blended to the colour of the trench wall behind him.

Carrie sank to the ground once again. More Unity soldiers passed, and Transgalactic Council Managers and other Council staff. Squashpumps also slid by. No one spoke a word to Carrie. It was as if she didn't exist. Resentment gave way to self-pity. She fought down the rising lump in her throat. She was determined not to cry. She had been right to do what she did. They just didn't understand. No one cared about the squashpumps more than her. The only person she had endangered by going alone to the squashpump pile was herself.

A squashpump glided to a stop. "They told me I'd find ye here."

Carrie wondered which one it was. They looked so similar.

"If I'd've known what ye were going t' do I'd ne'er have told ye about ma bairns."

MacDougal. Carrie closed her eyes for a moment. Her impulse was to apologise, but that would mean admitting what she had done was wrong. "I was going to talk to the placktoids and save your children. The Unity were preparing to storm the mound. Who knows what would have happened then?"

"Tsk. What ye did was more risky, and stupid. No doot about it. What did ye think was going t' happen? Yon placktoids would listen to ye? Ye think ye're that important do ye?"

A flush crept over Carrie's face. She swallowed. "No, I don't think



I'm that important. I was just trying...I wanted to help."

"Sometimes the best help ye can offer is doing nothing. Doing what ye're told."

She could find no answer to this, and MacDougal began to leave. "Wait." The squashpump stopped. "What about your children and eggs? Are they safe?"

"Yon mechanicals destroyed our eggs days ago, but the adults and bairns managed t' escape into the walls."

"Thank goodness. That's something at least, isn't it?"

"Yes, no thanks t' ye." MacDougal glided away.

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CARRIE'S DIRTY FACE was streaked with tears when Gavin finally returned. In the hours while she waited, she wondered what they were going to do with her. Would they charge her with something? Put her on trial? Or just give her the sack? She also tried several times to talk to the guard, hoping for a friendly voice, but he never answered and only stood immobile and nearly invisible to those who didn't know he was there. She wondered at his stamina, for she was chilled through and her muscles ached no matter in what position she stood or sat. But all her fatigue melted away while she listened to what Gavin had to say as the guard released her from her restraints, and she stretched and rubbed her wrists and ankles.

"The Council have been unable to trace the transgalactic route the placktoids took, and so far there have been no sightings on any inhabited planet in the entire galaxy. It is most puzzling. There were large numbers within the metropolis. Too many to hide easily."

"They've disappeared entirely?"

"To all intents and purposes, yes. Locating the placktoids is now the primary focus of the Council's efforts. They represent a grave danger to all sentient beings. Council and Unity resources are being withdrawn from non-life-threatening disputes, and new staff are being recruited to address the crisis, which in your case is extremely fortunate."

Carrie stopped stretching. "Really? Why?"

The insectoid alien seemed to consider his words for a moment. "Perhaps against my better judgement, I argued strongly that you should remain in service."

"Oh...thanks."

"Technically, you did not disobey a directive because no order was given not to approach the squashpump city as an individual. It was assumed no member of staff would do something so foolish and

ignorant.”

Anger flared in Carrie. They still didn’t understand.

“I pointed out that your experiences with the placktoids could prove useful in the future, and that we needed every operative we had if we were protect galactic civilisations from their threat. I persuaded the Board that with remedial training your performance might improve to acceptable standards.”

Carrie frowned. Remedial training? They were acting like she didn’t know what she was doing.

“This training is for poorly qualified applicants, and it is the final opportunity for badly performing Officers to remain in employment with the Council. In truth I believe the only reason the Board agreed to it is because they currently have far weightier and pressing matters on hand. However, it is important that you understand the gravity of your error,” Gavin went on, but Carrie wasn’t listening.

*Remedial training?* She shook her head.

## Chapter Four – Begging a Favour

“WOW, WHAT HAPPENED to you?” asked Dave as Carrie arrived by transgalactic gateway through the cupboard under her kitchen sink.

Carrie slung her Council Officer’s toolbox onto a table and peered at her reflection in the stainless steel panel at the back of her cooker. The hazy image was dishevelled, dirt-smudged and inflamed with pink marks from the baby placktoid attack.

“You won’t believe it.” Carrie bent down to pat her dog, Rogue, who was quivering with effort as he resisted the urge to jump up and lick her face.

“Sit down,” said Dave. “I’ll make some tea.”

With a sigh, Carrie slumped down at the table. While waiting for her tea, she related the events of the siege, the words pouring out in a torrent of outrage and incredulity. After a while she calmed down a little. She took a sip of her drink and said, “And what do you think they did when they found out I’d gone there all by myself to try a different approach? To try something other than going in there all gung-ho and risking the lives of innocent squashpumps?” Her mug thumped to the table and tea sloshed over the mug’s lip and ran down the sides. “They ARRESTED me.”

Dave had been riffling through Carrie’s toolbox, pulling out devices and peering at them before placing them on the table. “Uh-huh.” He took out another object. It was a large, thick tablet in a plastic wrapper. He held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

Carrie frowned. “No, I don’t. It looks like a dishwasher tablet.”

“Carrie,” Dave said, “it’s a Transgalactic Council Officer device. I don’t *think* washing dishes is in your remit.”

“Did you hear what I said? They put me under arrest. For doing my job.” Her voice and eyebrows rose in indignation.

Carefully putting down the tablet, her friend paused a moment, his expression uncomfortable. “But...you weren’t really doing your job, were you?”

“What? Of course I was. I’m a *Liaison* Officer. I was trying to *liaise* with the placktoids. Resolve the dispute peacefully.”

Dave dug into the bag for another object, avoiding eye contact. “Well, yes, but isn’t your job supposed to be doing what the Transgalactic Council tell you to do? I mean, first of all. If they’d wanted someone to go in there alone, they would have sent someone, wouldn’t they?”

Carrie couldn’t believe her ears. Even Dave, her best friend, didn’t understand. “Just because it wasn’t their idea, it doesn’t mean it was the wrong thing to do.” She added another spoonful of sugar to her

tea and vigorously stirred it in, rattling the teaspoon against the sides of the mug.

“What I mean is...” Dave sighed and rubbed his forehead. “...it might have been better to ask Gavin first.”

“That wouldn’t have been very clever of me, would it? If I’d asked him he would have told me not to do it. They’d already made their minds up. *Someone* had to do something. Just because I was that someone, they decide to punish me for it.”

Her friend opened his mouth to speak but closed it again. He appeared to change his mind about what to say. “So, what happens now?”

“Urgh.” Carrie shook her head. “Now I have to go on remedial training. It’s for new recruits and Officers who are on their final warnings. And if I don’t pass, that’s it. Goodbye job. Goodbye journeying between the stars, meeting aliens and having adventures. If I’m not—” she mimed quote marks with her fingers “—*trained*, I’m stuck here on Earth working in a call centre for a living. I mean, it’s okay, but I want to do something more with my life.” She took a sip of tea. “Anyway, the good thing is, you’re coming with me.”

“What?” Dave pushed his chair away from the table. “No no no.” He wagged a finger at her. “Uh-uh. That’s not happening. Not again. Not after last time. Flying around on ancient mythological beasts? Being chased by giant gods of Ancient Greece? No way, Carrie, no way. I ate their food and drank their drink. I could be immortal.” He pointed at her. “You could be immortal.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Carrie exclaimed. “Look, calm down, all right? It’s perfectly safe. It’s Gavin’s idea, not mine. He said it was the only way he could persuade the Council to let me stay on. He said something about how you were clearly a calming influence on me and I could learn from your sensible, level-headed attitude.” She rolled her eyes. “The thing is, now of course there’s a massive crisis. They don’t have any idea where the placktoids have gone or what they’re doing. They want to increase the Council and Unity presence across the galaxy, so they’re having a huge recruitment drive and sending all the less-qualified candidates on basic training. That’s where we’ll be going.”

“No, Carrie, no.” Dave shook his head and folded his arms. “That’s where you’ll be going. Not me.”

“Oh come on, Dave, it’s just training on board a Council starship. You won’t have to *do* anything. After a week you’ll be home again. You know they’ll deliver us back here only a minute or two after we leave. Think of it like a holiday without having to take any time off work.”

“Huh, some holiday. The answer’s no. I’m sorry, I know you love

it, but I'm not cut out for doing the kinds of things you do. I'm the stay-at-home type." He got up and took his and Carrie's mugs to the sink, where he washed them. Carrie frowned at his back. After placing the mugs upside down on the draining board, he returned to his chair and lifted his jacket from the back of it. "A nice, steady, easy job at the call centre. Friday nights at the pictures, Saturday nights down the pub. Two weeks in Spain every year. That's the kind of person I am, Carrie, and I'm not going to change." He put on his jacket and began to zip it up.

"Put it back."

Dave's hand stopped midway. "What? Put what back?"

"Whatever it is you've got. You took something from my bag and put it in your jacket pocket before you went to wash the mugs."

"No I didn't." But he looked uncomfortable, and a flush began to creep across his face.

Carrie folded her arms and gazed at her friend.

"Oh, all right," he said, deflating a little. He took Carrie's magnetic field neutraliser out of his pocket and put it on the table. "I just wanted to have a closer look. I would have given it back."

Picking up the neutraliser, Carrie twirled it thoughtfully before placing it carefully in front of her friend. "It isn't just your *condition* that makes you take things, is it? You've always been fascinated by my Liaison Officer's tools, haven't you?"

"Who wouldn't be? They're alien technology. They can do things Earth scientists haven't even dreamed of. They're fascinating."

"Sit down a sec."

He shook his head and zipped his jacket to the top. "I have to go. It's late and we've got work in the morning."

"Just a minute, okay? I won't keep you."

Sighing, Dave sat down. "I hope this isn't about going on training with you. I've told you, there's no way."

Carrie held up the neutraliser and looked into her friend's eyes. "What if I were to tell you that you'd get to know what all of these things do, and how to use them? And not only that, Gavin told me our supplies were being updated with *new* devices. The very latest technology they have. They're pushing out all the stops in an effort to protect everyone from the placktoids."

Dave didn't reply. He looked from the objects to Carrie and back again.

"There wouldn't be any danger at all. You'd only have to do the training exercises with me. You wouldn't even have to pass them, just be there with me. That's all Gavin said. Just come along."

Still Dave didn't speak. He picked up the thick tablet his friend hadn't been able to identify earlier.

Carrie took it from him and put it down. She held his hands and looked him square in the face. "Please?"

He slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. "I'm going to regret this, I know I am."

Carrie grinned.

## Chapter Five – All Aboard

IT WASN'T UNTIL CARRIE was standing among the candidates training to be Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers that it occurred to her that she and Dave would be the only humans. The most noticeable individual in the group was a huge, dark green blob towards the back of the room. To Carrie's left was a small hairy creature about as high as her knee, with no face, and on her right, sitting atop a cylinder as high as her waist, was a squashpump. There was also a many-legged insect that seemed to be distantly related to her Manager, Gavin's, species and a light that flashed intermittently without any energy source as far as she could see. But perhaps the strangest Liaison Officer candidate of the bunch was a box; just a cube of deep red, shiny material. How it got about, she had no idea.

Dave was standing two candidates away, looking as though he was already regretting his decision to join her in the week-long training session. He was looking around the creamy ceramic room they were standing in aboard the Transgalactic Council starship. Carrie suspected he was trying to avoid looking at the training manager who was currently addressing them, explaining the living arrangements and their general schedule for the week. Though the manager looked like Gavin, it was a female. Carrie knew this because it had a hole in its abdomen, an anatomical fact she had learned through a painful faux pas in her previous assignment. She yawned. The manager had been droning on for at least fifteen minutes.

"Any questions?" she asked, apparently coming to the end of her introductory speech.

"Yes," said the squashpump trainee, "where will we be sleeping? And this atmosphere's too dry for ma skin. 'Tis makin' me uncomfortable."

"Do not worry," replied the manager. "All your cabins, uniforms and equipment have been designed or modified to suit your species' requirements. For example, you will find a uniform in your climatically controlled cabin that will keep your skin moist. We are quite used to meeting the ranging needs of our staff. Anything else?"

"How will we do the exercises? Don't ask that, it's obvious. Well, it isn't obvious to us. Speak for yourself. We want to know. Ask again. Yes, ask her again. No, you ask. I asked once already."

Carrie couldn't see who was speaking, but her heart leaped. The voices must have been coming from the box, or rather, not the box, but what was inside it. She had met the yellow liquid known as ootoon on her first assignment. A collection of individuals melded

into one amorphous mass, it constantly argued with itself. It was wonderful to have the chance to meet it again, but she wasn't sure how it could work as an officer for the Transgalactic Council.

"Each candidate has something to offer to the role of Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer," replied the manager. "Where an individual is prevented from completing a training exercise by its anatomy it will not be required to take part."

"Well, that isn't fair," exclaimed the hairy creature at Carrie's side in a surprisingly deep baritone, though she couldn't figure out how it was speaking. "We should all do the same training. How are you going to tell who the best candidates are?"

"Let us be clear. The galaxy is home to hundreds of sentient, civilised species. Each possesses skills that are useful to the Council. Excluding a species because it cannot complete a certain task means the Council is deprived of other benefits it offers. Consequently, during your training we may not be assessing which of you perform the best in any given exercise, but who are best suited to the role of Liaison Officer. Your tasks are a means for us to observe your skills."

*Great, thought Carrie. Why do they have to make it complicated? Why can't they just tell us what they're looking for? Then I can show them I can do it.*

"More questions?" asked the manager. After a pause it continued, "No? Then you may go to your quarters and settle in. The doors on this starship are activated by pheromones or genetic signatures. The entrances to your allotted cabins have been programmed to open to only your touch, and your partner's if you are sharing. Training rooms and other common rooms are opened by pheromones. Your translators will produce them if you hold them up to the doors. A map and key to the door symbols and your individual itineraries are on your briefing devices."

The group of trainees began to break up, the box of ootoon rolling on hidden wheels towards the door. Dave was already rummaging in his bag, looking like a child on Christmas morning. Carrie went over to him. "Let's go to our room. You can have a proper look at everything in there."

"Our room?" Her friend stopped what he was doing.

"Yes, they've put us together. Didn't you know?"

"Oh."

"What's wrong? Do you snore or something?"

"Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, how pleasant to see you again." The training manager had come over as the group dispersed.

"Oh, yes, you too," replied Carrie, confused. Had she met the insectoid alien before? The only two she knew were Gavin and... She



sniffed. She could smell a faint spicy vanilla scent. It couldn't be...?  
"Errruorerrrrrh?"

"My English name is Errruorerrrrrhch, yes."

"Wow, I mean, good to see you." Carrie struggled to reconcile this apparently friendly alien with the Transgalactic Council Manager who had given her such a hard time on her previous assignment. Errruorerrrrrhch's beef had actually been with her former lover, Carrie's boss, Gavin, though that hadn't prevented her from taking it out on Carrie. "But, I thought you couldn't speak English."

"I apologise. I may have allowed personal feelings to intrude upon my professionalism in the past. I am able to speak English, but I am afraid I chose not to at the time. But let us put all that behind us now. I hope to establish a good working relationship with you henceforth."

"Sure, of course."

"Allow me to show you and your companion to your quarters."

"Thanks."

Carrie and Dave followed Errruorerrrrrhch through the maze of tunnels to a recessed door that looked the same as all the others, only with a unique set of symbols outlining it. Carrie tried to remember the route but wasn't sure she could. On the way, the manager had chatted with the two humans, praising Carrie for her ingenuity in uncovering the connection between the dandrobians and the placktoids. Carrie could hardly believe this amiable insectoid alien and her former manager were the same individual.

As Errruorerrrrrhch left, saying she would see them at breakfast, Dave placed his hand on the door and after a moment it opened. Inside was a room similar to a cabin on a cruise ship, containing twin bunks, low lockers, and a small shower room. The bags they had brought with them from Earth and two bright orange Transgalactic Council Officer uniforms had been placed on the beds. Best of all, in Carrie's opinion, there was a window. Beyond it, a starscape shimmered. Her breath caught in her throat. "It's wonderful. Perfect."

Dave sat on the lower bunk. "Can we put a curtain over that?" he asked, gesturing towards the window.

"Why? It's a beautiful view."

"I don't think so." He went to the window and looked out. "Space is so cold, and dark, and..." he grimaced, "...endless."

There was a buzzing sound at the door. Carrie placed her hand on the surface, and as the door opened, she took a step back.

"Bloody hell," said Dave, the colour draining from his face.

"Carrie, I am pleased to inform you I will be present for the duration of this training exercise."

It was Gavin, but it was more than Gavin. Crawling over every inch of his surface were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of smaller

Gavins. As he spoke, one crawled out of his mouth. Carrie gave a small scream.

“You appear to be disturbed. Please be assured, there is no cause for alarm. I would like to introduce you to the bounty of my union with your former Manager, Errruorerrrrrhch.”

“These are y—your and Errruorerrrrrh’s k—kids?” stuttered Carrie.

“That is correct. We have not yet named them all, otherwise I would introduce you. Stop that, you little scamp.” Gavin appeared to address the comment to a tiny insectoid alien swinging from one of his antennae. “In our species the father cares for the offspring until the first moult. I thought it would be pleasant to be here during the training programme while I am on paternity leave, and fortunately the Transgalactic Council agreed to my request.”

“Fortunately,” muttered Dave, who was backed against the rear of the room.

## Chapter Six – Dinner Diversions

“YOU CAN’T PUT YOUR stuff there. My stuff’s there,” said Dave.

Carrie eyed the surface of the locker nearest the bunks, where Dave had arranged the entire contents of his Transgalactic Officer bag into neat rows and columns, all the items spaced equal distances apart.

“Well, where can I put my bag, then?”

“Over there,” said Dave, pointing to another locker on the far side of the cabin. “That’s yours.”

“But I wanted to use this one, next to the bed. Then I can reach my things without having to get up.”

Dave sighed. “Well it’s too late now. I put my stuff away while you were in the shower. I’ve organised everything.”

“I can see that.” Carrie threw her officer’s bag across the room onto the top of the locker, where it landed with a crash.

Dave winced. “You ought to be more careful. You’ll break something.”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s anything fragile in there. With all the technology the Council has, everything’s bound to be pretty tough.”

Her friend didn’t answer. He was examining one of the thick tablets he had found interesting before, when the two had been talking in Carrie’s kitchen. “I’m looking forward to finding out what this is.”

“It looks like a—”

“It isn’t a dishwasher tablet.”

“But it does look just like one, though, doesn’t it? It’s even got a plastic wrapper. Why don’t you open it and see what’s inside?”

Dave put the tablet with the rest of the items on top of the locker, positioning it carefully. “We might not be supposed to open it yet. It might be for a training exercise.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s okay.” Carrie reached for the tablet, but Dave pushed her hand away.

“Don’t take mine. If you’re going to open one, open your own.”

“You’re such a fusspot. They’re all the same, you know.” Carrie unfastened her bag and began pulling out devices, scattering them on the locker top. Two or three dropped to the floor. “Here it is.” She took out the tablet and pulled at the wrapper. When it wouldn’t come off, she ripped the covering with her teeth and spat out pieces of plastic. Dave watched where they landed.

“Hmph, look.” Carrie held out the package contents, a grey cake of a powdery material. “It definitely looks like a dishwasher tablet. Oh.”

“What?”

“It’s going all crumbly.” The surface of the tablet had begun to disintegrate. Carrie rubbed it, and more of the powdery material broke away. “Oh well, never mind.” She tossed it onto the locker, where it broke into pieces. She put her hands on her hips. “Are you ready for dinner?”

Dave stood and stretched. “Yes, I’ve looked up where we need to go.” He picked up a transparent piece of plastic that displayed a map. Carrie knew this gadget: it was the briefing device that held the information she needed for her assignments. She hadn’t known it contained maps too.

“Great. Let’s go, then,” she said, sliding her translator into her pocket. She planned on getting reacquainted with the ootoon over the evening meal.

“Don’t you think you should bring yours?” Dave held up the transparent briefing device.

“No, I’ll be fine. I’ll just follow you around.” Carrie grinned.

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DINNER FOR THE TWO humans looked like spaghetti bolognese, but it tasted like seaweed, and brick dust, and a graduation party hangover. It was as though the Transgalactic Council chefs had seen spaghetti bolognese but hadn’t the remotest clue what went into it, and even if they had, they hadn’t the slightest chance of getting the ingredients. As a vegetarian, it was important to Carrie that the meal contained no meat, and judging by the taste and the horrified reaction of Errruorerrrrrhch when she’d told her about her dietary requirements—as if she was some kind of monster for even suggesting the Council would provide dishes made from animals—she was confident that it didn’t.

From the look on Dave’s face as he chewed, she guessed he was adding the meal to the list of reasons why he didn’t want to be there. Keen to avoid his reproachful glare, Carrie turned her attention to the ootoon sitting, or rather, occupying the space next to her. The box lid was open, and the ootoon was visible within, filling the box to the brim. Sitting as she was at a dinner table, Carrie couldn’t help but be reminded again of the alien’s resemblance to custard, though she hadn’t touched a drop of the stuff after mistakenly eating some ootoon in her first assignment. Drips of a white liquid were falling from a pipe on the ceiling. Surely it couldn’t be milk?

“It’s so wonderful to see you again,” she said.

“Hello, who are you? It’s that alien, from the time with the placktoids, remember? No, I don’t. Me neither. I wasn’t involved in

any of that. The one in the placktoid starship. You must know. Oh, yes, we went up, didn't we?"

"Yes, that was me," interrupted Carrie. "And Dave was there, too." She glanced at her friend, who was munching stoically. "You protected us when the starship crashed. And my boss, Gavin, and my colleague, Belinda. I wanted to thank you. With everything that was going on, I forgot to. You saved our lives."

"Did we really do that? You're welcome. I think so. No problem. Anyone would have done it."

The clatter of cutlery hitting the floor distracted Carrie. Dave had dropped his knife and fork and was staring, white-faced, at the doorway. Gavin had arrived and was heading in their direction.

"I—I'm full," said Dave. "I'll see you back at the room," he spluttered before darting to the wall and, as Gavin approached, edging along it towards the exit. As soon as Gavin was safely in front of him, he bolting through the door. The insectoid alien manager had brought his babies along. They leaped and ran all over him, occasionally falling off then climbing up again. Carrie wondered how he moved under all the additional weight, but his offspring didn't seem to bother him at all.

"Hello, Carrie," said Gavin, "I thought I would find you here. I hope the human food is to your liking?"

"Well, it's...I'm sure the chefs tried very hard—"

"Good, good. Oooh, that tickles."

Carrie assumed the second remark was addressed to one of his children.

"I am not hungry myself. I will not eat again until these little rascals have moulted. I came here merely to reassure your friend, Dave, about the first test, but he seemed to be in rather a hurry to leave. His character is rather different from yours, being more circumspect and cautious. It would be natural for him to feel rather wary of invasive procedures, but the examination is entirely harmless. Would you tell him for me?" The alien's head swivelled round as Errruorerrrrrhch entered the canteen. "Oh my goodness, I must leave. Do pass on my message, please. I would not want Dave to be unduly concerned."

"Yes, I—" said Carrie, but Gavin was already scuttling away towards the opposite exit, taking his hundreds of offspring with him. As Carrie wondered why he was avoiding the mother of his children, Errruorerrrrrhch addressed the Transgalactic Council Officer trainees.

"I apologise for interrupting your meal. I have a small announcement. We have made a minor change to the itinerary. Due to the placktoid threat and the accompanying necessity of expediting your training, we will be conducting the first test, a deep brain scan,

tonight while you sleep. This test measures the type and extent of nerve connections within your brains or other neural systems of your species, and the results indicate your general ability in the position of Liaison Officer. This is a starting point for us to determine how you might best work within the role, and which features of training will be of special benefit to you.”

*Deep brain scan?* Carrie frowned as she picked up her fork and twirled the awful spaghetti-like substance around it. Scanning brains seemed an odd way to assess someone’s skills. What would the test tell them about her? She had no idea, but she didn’t like the sound of it. She had always thought she was more sporty than brainy. Why couldn’t they just let her show them what she could do?

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FOR THE REST OF THE meal and some time after, Carrie chatted with the ootoon—with some difficulty—and got to know the other trainees. The large green blob was especially friendly, but the flashing light was quite standoffish, she thought.

When she got back to the cabin, Dave was already asleep. She decided not to wake him up to tell him about the brain scan. There was no point in worrying him unnecessarily. As she got ready for bed, she noticed the room looked a lot tidier than she had left it. The floor was clear, and all her Liaison Officer devices had been placed neatly away in her bag.

## Chapter Seven – Bring Out the Big Guns

WHEN CARRIE WOKE, SHE could hear Dave in the shower. She dozed back off to sleep while waiting for him to finish. The sound of the door opening jolted her awake again. She sat up, stretched and yawned. “Did you get a good sleep?”

“Not bad.” Dave was filling his bag with his Liaison Officer devices. “You’d better hurry up. Breakfast will be over soon.”

“Oh no.” Carrie swung her legs over the edge of the bunk and jumped down. “I’ll have to miss it then. I won’t have time for a shower otherwise.”

“You can’t have a shower. I’ve just cleaned it. And you shouldn’t miss breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day.”

“What? Why did you clean it? It’s a shower. It’s already clean.”

Dave narrowed his eyes at her. “No it isn’t. Anyway, you had a shower last night. I thought you wouldn’t have one this morning too.”

“Of course I’m going to have one this morning. What do you think I am? Dirty or something?”

Dave opened his mouth to speak but changed his mind. He took a comb from his bag and began to comb his hair in front of the mirror on the wall above her locker. He looked fantastic in his fluorescent orange uniform, as Carrie had known he would. She sighed as she remembered how hers made her look especially short and chubby. Maybe it wasn’t a bad thing she was missing breakfast.

“You’d better hurry up then,” said Dave, returning his comb to his bag and fastening it. “See you later.” He shouldered the bag and left. As the door closed behind him, Carrie looked at her reflection in the mirror, checking for any spots that might have appeared overnight. She leaned in to peer at a suspicious white dot on her chin. As she did so her image disappeared, and a message replaced it. The mirror wasn’t only a mirror, it was a communication screen. The message it was displaying was the results of the deep brain scan the Council had performed on the two of them overnight.

Carrie’s hands fell away from her face as she read the figures. Their levels of ability were shown as percentages, and Carrie’s and Dave’s were very different, but not in the way Carrie would have expected. Dave’s compatibility with the role of Transgalactic Council Liaison Officer was ninety-seven per cent. Hers was thirty-four. Thirty-four.

She gripped the sides of her locker. How could it be possible? She had always known that her selection for the Officer role had been a fluke. She had happened to write an ad on a dating website that was the exact code for the job application, and because she loved the Officer’s bag she had strong-armed Gavin into taking her on. But she

had always assumed, deep down, that she could do the work. Hadn't she been the one to uncover the placktoids' lies and their blackmailing of the squashpumps? None of the others had seen what she had, not even oh-so-perfect Belinda. And hadn't she discovered that the placktoids were in league with the dandrobians, former tyrants of the galaxy?

Could it be true that she was terrible at the job, and that level-headed Dave would be much better? She swallowed as she thought of the week ahead, imagining her friend, who she had taken such pains to persuade to come along, beating her at every exercise. She imagined the final decision by the Council to fire her and hire Dave instead. And he didn't even want the job.

The results glared out at her from the screen. She couldn't let Dave see them. It was just too embarrassing. She waved a hand over it and breathed a sigh of relief as the message disappeared.

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HER FRIEND LOOKED AT her quizzically as she entered the training room. Guessing her misery must be written all over her face, she faked a smile and went to the opposite end of the line of trainees. She could avoid difficult questions until break time at least, and hopefully by then she would have got over her shock and could act more normal. The room was empty. Carrie wondered what today's training was. She hadn't had time to read her briefing device.

The other trainees ranged out between her and Dave, all variously attired in bright orange. The large green blob, who had introduced herself at dinner as Audrey, got about by rolling, and seemed almost entirely encased in fabric. For some reason the faceless hairy creature only had a narrow circlet of orange around its head. The box the ootoon lived in had been painted orange.

Errruorerrrrrhch was leading the session. "Welcome...at last," said the alien to Carrie as she took her place. "As I was just explaining, due to the current pan-galactic crisis, we have decided to include additional elements in our Officer equipment and training. Customarily, Council staff are unarmed. Our roles are diplomatic and the possession of weapons is contrary to our aims of administration, coordination, management and reconciliation. In the present climate, however, Officer safety is our primary concern. Unity and Council staff are stretched thin across the galaxy as we attempt to locate the placktoids and protect galactic citizens, and it is possible you may find yourselves alone and in danger."

*Weapons. Cool,* thought Carrie. Images of scifi skirmishes on TV



and film, with phasers, laser guns and other futuristic arms, came into her mind. *But how will we fit them in our bags?*

“We are also faced with the problem that placktoid exoskeletons are notoriously strong and tough, and the most powerful weaponry penetrates them poorly, even at close range. The latest weapon designs are, we believe, more effective, though of course we have no placktoids to test them on, were such an endeavour even ethical,” the insectoid alien paused before adding, “which it is not.”

Carrie sighed. When was she going to stop waffling and give them their guns?

“This morning you will practice using the new equipment, but once training is over, all weapons must be returned. It is strictly prohibited to carry these or any other arms aboard a Council starship.”

*Duh! Come on, hurry up.* Glancing at the squashpump beside her, Carrie wondered how on Earth it was going to carry a massive laser cannon.

“Now, please collect a weapon. I will explain how to use them before we begin.”

Carrie looked around the room. Where was the gun cabinet? Or big box of arms? Then she saw it. At Errruorerrrrrhch’s feet, or rather, her front claws, was a square hole. A small, square hole. Elbowing the other trainees aside, she went to it, squatted down and looked in. The hole was full of small green objects about the size of cigarette lighters. She sat back on her heels. *These are the weapons?* She picked one up. It was smooth and rectangular. There was no trigger nor even a button to press.

“I apologise, Officer Hatchett,” said Errruorerrrrrhch. “In the haste to design and manufacture these weapons, we were unable to include the usual attachments for human use. Hopefully, during this session both you and the other human can learn to use thought operation.”

“Tsk. They canna work things w’ their minds?” said the squashpump. It had jumped into the hole and was holding a weapon with its tentacles.

“Don’t be rude,” said the ootoon, as Errruorerrrrrhch dropped a weapon into it. The green object sank beneath the yellow liquid before bobbing to the surface. “They can’t help it. Humans are very nice. One day they’ll catch up. Yes, one day. No need to point out their weaknesses.”

“Och, you’re right. Sorry aboot that.”

“That’s okay,” said Carrie. Dave tried to catch her eye as he collected a weapon, but she looked away.

Errruorerrrrrhch explained that the trainees would practise shooting holograms of the various placktoid types until break time.

The weapons were set to practice mode so they were harmless, but she warned the humans to take care they didn't accidentally change the settings to operational.

*Crap*, Carrie thought, *how am I supposed to tell?*

"Simply point the weapon at the target, concentrate hard, and will it to fire," Errruorerrrrrhch advised her and Dave.

When holographic placktoids appeared before them, all the trainees except the humans fired their weapons simultaneously, and the placktoids they hit blinked out. Carrie pointed her weapon at a stapler placktoid and willed it to fire with all her might, but nothing happened. She was secretly pleased to see Dave also fail. It was one thing at least he didn't do better than her.

But on the next try, Dave's weapon sputtered to life and a bright beam shone out, while Carrie drew another blank. He didn't hit a placktoid, but he had done better than her. He looked over at her, grinning. Carrie returned a half-hearted smile, and frowned with concentration as another set of placktoids appeared. This time they were moving, though slowly. Again, she failed to fire her weapon. Dave not only fired, he hit a placktoid. He whooped, and Audrey bumped into him in what Carrie supposed was a gesture of congratulations.

By break time, Carrie had, with a huge effort of concentration, managed to fire her weapon once, and at the time she had been pointing it at Errruorerrrrrhch, who had performed an impressive feat of gymnastics in leaping right across the room.

"Don't worry, you'll get there." said Dave as they forced down a drink that was pretending to be coffee, though it actually tasted like a throat infection Carrie had contracted when she was nine.

It might have been her imagination, but she was sure she detected a patronising tone in her friend's voice.

## Chapter Eight – Decisions, Decisions

“YOU WILL BE GIVEN FURTHER opportunities to practise using the new weapons at regular intervals during your training,” said Errruorerrrrrhch as they lined up for the afternoon session. Carrie’s heart sank. Her skills at controlling a gun with her mind hadn’t improved much after the morning break. She had always known her powers of concentration weren’t good, but being beaten by a box of custard was pretty demoralising. Dave’s prowess had improved with each shot he took.

*Oh well,* Carrie thought, *maybe this session will be about something I’m good at.*

“This afternoon we will be concentrating on logical thought processes and effective decision-making.”

Carrie’s shoulders slumped. The door opened, and a robot cart carrying an assortment of helmets entered. The two that looked as though they were for Carrie and Dave had opaque visors similar to those on Unity helmets. Errruorerrrrrhch instructed the trainees to put on their helmets. Carrie wondered how the ootoon would put on a helmet, but when she looked around she couldn’t see its box. She put up a hand. “Shouldn’t we wait for everyone to arrive?”

“All the required trainees are present,” replied Errruorerrrrrhch. “Where a session has little benefit to a candidate, it does not appear on the individual’s schedule. During this free time the trainee is expected to practise other skills. This information was stated in your itinerary on your briefing device.”

*Oh, that,* thought Carrie. She would have to have a look at it that evening after dinner. She closed the visor on her helmet and a vision of a landscape appeared before her eyes. A familiar landscape. The legend at the bottom of the screen read:

THESE SCENARIOS ARE DRAWN FROM REAL-LIFE  
TRANSGALACTIC INTERCULTURAL COMMUNITY CRISIS  
LIAISON OFFICERS’ EXPERIENCES. AT THE CRUCIAL  
DECISION POINT THE SCENE WILL FREEZE AND YOU WILL  
BE OFFERED SEVERAL OPTIONS. YOUR FINAL DECISION  
WILL BE RECORDED BY YOUR DEVICE. THE PROBLEMS  
INCREASE IN DIFFICULTY.

Carrie sat on the floor and crossed her legs as the video began to play. She was back in Dandrobia, at her first meeting with the dandrobians and squashpumps. The events played out exactly as she remembered them. A gust of wind blew, toppling the squashpump

Foreign Secretary's column, which sliced him in two. The squashpumps began leaping onto dandrobian heads and invading their brains in revenge. Apaté, the ebony-haired dandrobian, appeared from behind Carrie's seat, wringing her hands and telling Carrie she must leave right away before the rest of the squashpumps arrived. The screen froze and words appeared.

SHOULD YOU:

A) IMMEDIATELY CONTACT YOUR MANAGER TO OPEN A TRANSGALACTIC GATEWAY

B) REMAIN DURING THE HOSTILITIES IN ORDER TO ASSESS THE SITUATION FURTHER

C) PUT A SAFE DISTANCE BETWEEN YOURSELF AND THE UNHARMED DANDROBIAN BEFORE CONTACTING YOUR MANAGER AND REQUESTING A TRANSGALACTIC GATEWAY

D) NONE OF THE ABOVE. PLEASE INSERT YOUR ANSWER

Carrie's face burned. She wondered whether the other trainees knew this had happened to her. Dave certainly did. Now that she saw the options in black and white, the right decision seemed obvious, but she decided to submit the decision she made at the time anyway. The Council hadn't been there. They didn't know what it had been like when she was in the middle of it all. She concentrated and thought the letter A.

WRONG. THE CORRECT ANSWER IS C. IF YOU GAVE AN UNLISTED ANSWER A RESPONSE WILL BE SENT TO YOUR CABIN COMMUNICATION DEVICE THIS EVENING.

As the next scenario appeared, Carrie's heart sank further. Now she was back on the placktoid starship after her first encounter with the placktoid commander. She was lifted into the giant paperclip and returned to the ootoon planet surface, where the paperclip dumped her in the yellow ootoon ocean. When she had made it to shore, the screen froze.

SHOULD YOU:

A) COMMUNICATE WITH THE OOTOON USING YOUR TRANSLATOR AND ATTEMPT TO FIND OUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE MISSING PLACKTOIDS.

B) CONTACT YOUR MANAGER FOR INSTRUCTIONS

C) EAT SOME OF THE OOTOON (THIS IS A SERIOUS OPTION)

D) NONE OF THE ABOVE. PLEASE INSERT YOUR ANSWER

Carrie cringed and thanked her lucky stars the box of ootoon wasn't at the session. This time even she couldn't justify her actions. She thought the letter A. The screen flashed CORRECT WELL DONE before moving on to another sequence of events.

By the end of the afternoon her head was buzzing with decision-making. She hadn't thought it was possible for your brain to actually hurt with thinking. For all her effort, she only managed to score seventy-five per cent correct. As she removed her helmet, she caught sight of Dave's face. He was smiling, and when he noticed her looking at him, he gave her a thumbs up. She smiled back weakly.

As they returned to their cabin to freshen up before dinner, her friend chattered about how much fun the afternoon had been. Carrie said little, and when her friend told her he had scored ninety-one, she congratulated him without reporting her own result.

They hadn't gone far before Errruorerrrrhch caught up with them. Carrie was grateful for the distraction until the alien said, "I hope you were not excessively dismayed by the Council's use of your own experiences as an Officer in our training material. It is standard practice. We have found that trainees benefit most from observing real-life experiences in the field."

"Oh no, I don't mind at all," replied Carrie through her teeth. Dave looked away.

"Good. It is always preferable to accept our errors and learn from them. Do you not agree?"

"Yes, I...hello, Gavin." Her former manager had appeared around a bend in the corridor, covered in his children. As soon as he spotted them, however, he about-faced and sped away. "Wow, what's up with him?"

Errruorerrrrhch chittered. "He is fearful of me. It is very tiresome. In our species, the mother is occasionally driven to eat the weaker of her offspring. It was for this reason it became the custom for the father to care for them during the earliest stage, when they appear the most tasty. Of course, I would never dream of ingesting the little...morsels. Their father is excessively cautious."

Dave stumbled and fell against the wall, where he remained as Carrie and Errruorerrrrhch walked on. Carrie swallowed. "It seems a bit weird he's here, then. I mean, if he's so paranoid that you'll eat your kids."

“Your words surprise me, Officer Hatchett. You are apparently unaware that your manager has a special attachment to you. His philandering habits were about to result in his third and final dismissal from a Transgalactic Council position when you uncovered the placktoid plot, thereby winning him a reprieve. He believes you have a fresh and original approach to your role. He is here to watch over your progress as he does not wish to lose you from his team. From the discussions we have had regarding your performance, I believe it would not be excessive for me to say that he cares about you.”

Her vision suddenly blurring, all Carrie could say was, “Really?”

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THE NEWS THAT GAVIN was there for her had eased Carrie’s mind a little by the time she got back to the cabin with Dave. Maybe she could go to him for tips on what to do to get through the week and pass the course.

The clothing that had been placed on their bunks in readiness for the next day’s training also made her feel better. At last, here was something she had a chance of succeeding in. Something she knew she could do much better than Dave. On her bed was a fluorescent orange swimsuit, and on Dave’s were swimming trunks.

Her friend blinked several times. “But I can’t swim.”

## Chapter Nine – Into the Deep

CARRIE DIVED EAGERLY into the clear water of the Council starship swimming pool the following day. She swam to the far end of the pool, flipped, pushed away with her feet, and swam back again. Dave stood at the edge, his arms hanging at his sides. Propping her elbows on the pool wall, Carrie looked up at her friend. “Jump in,” she said. “It’s shallow at this end. Look.” She stood on the bottom to show him that the water only came up to her shoulders.

Dave sat down and slid carefully into the water. He shivered and gripped his upper arms. “It’s freezing.”

“No it isn’t. Splash about a bit to warm yourself up.”

He patted the water like it was a friendly dog. Carrie turned her head to hide a smile.

“I don’t know why they’ve included swimming in the training,” said Dave. “It isn’t like we’d ever use it.”

Noting her friend’s use of ‘we’, as if finally imagining himself as a Liaison Officer, Carrie replied, “Of course we could. Remember when we got thrown in the ootoon ocean? If you’d been able to swim you wouldn’t have panicked so much.”

“I didn’t panic.”

“Yes, you did. I told you to keep still, but you were flailing about like a fish on speed.”

Dave’s mouth lifted at a corner. “Well, maybe a little. So would you if you thought you were going to die.”

A massive invertebrate Neptune rose up out of the water between them. Errruorerrrrrhch had arrived. Dave said, “Bloody hell,” and left the pool in a blur of movement. Carrie and the rest of the trainees remained in the water, bobbing around. To Carrie’s eyes, Audrey looked most at home, closely followed by the ootoon, which had oozed out of its box and was expanding into long, thick, yellow ribbons as if enjoying its escape from confinement.

“The first half of this morning’s session is devoted to becoming accustomed to moving in a liquid,” said Errruorerrrrrhch. “Several galactic civilisations are aquatic, as I’m sure you are aware, and while some of you are very familiar with this environment, others may need some practice at effective locomotion. You are expected to maintain your swimming skills through regular training for the duration of your employment.”

Audrey bumped lazily into Carrie and she pushed her away, giggling. This session was going to be fun.

“After break you will perform underwater tasks,” said Errruorerrrrrhch. “These tasks assess your physical agility and

strength. Neither skill is essential for the performance of your duties, but they may at times prove useful in the diverse situations an Officer experiences.”

Errruorerrrrrhch continued speaking, but Carrie was already idly swimming across the pool. She had heard all the important stuff. When she returned, Errruorerrrrrhch had left and Dave was in the pool again. He was standing in the corner looking cold while the other trainees were frolicking around him. Carrie couldn't help but feel a small, guilty surge of pleasure at his predicament. But he was still her friend, and it was she who had persuaded him to attend the training. She swam up to him. “Come on, I'll help you.”

Her friend shook his head. “There's no point. I'll never learn to swim in a single morning. I thought I'd try, but I don't know what to do. I might as well get out and tell Errruorerrrrrhch I can't do it.”

“Don't give up before you've started. Learning to swim is really important, even if you don't work for the Transgalactic Council. Come over here with me.” Dave followed her out into deeper water. “Now, hold my hands, and start kicking with your feet.” She gripped his hands as he lifted his feet off the floor and began to move them. “Wait, hold on.” She tightened her grip. “Okay, try again.” Once more he kicked. “Erm...could you stop for a minute?” As her friend stood on the pool floor, she looked down at his legs and feet. “How are you doing it?”

“Doing what?”

“How are you kicking? You're going backwards.”

“No I'm not.”

“Yes, you are. You're pulling me towards you. You should be pushing me away.”

Dave sighed. “It's no good. I can't do it.”

“Yes, you can. Let's try again.”

“Okay, if you like. But it's a waste of time.”

Carrie grabbed Dave's hands and pulled him gently forward as he kicked. She also helped him practise trying to float, and taught him the movements for breaststroke and front crawl. She couldn't remember learning to swim and had always been a natural in the water, so she wasn't sure if she was teaching Dave the right way, but after half an hour or so he managed a few strokes.

“Brilliant,” she exclaimed. “Well done.”

Dave wiped water from his face. “Thanks,” he said, “but I don't think I'll be winning any championships just yet.”

“We all have to start somewhere.” The other trainees were getting out of the water. “It must be nearly break time.”

“Yeah. I think I'll ask Errruorerrrrrhch if I can skip the second half. I'm never going to be able to do underwater stuff.”



“You never know until you try.” Carrie actually thought Dave was probably right, but she wanted to be encouraging. As she pulled herself up onto the side, however, the sight that greeted her made her wonder if Dave might be able to join in after all. In a corner of the swimming area was a pile of bright orange wetsuits.

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WHILE THE TRAINEES were getting ready for the second session, a mechanical, grinding sound came from the pool. The floor was sliding back, revealing a lower level much deeper than the first. Dave was looking pale. “Don’t worry,” said Carrie, “it looks like we’ll be diving. You don’t have to worry about sinking because you’re already underwater. But where’s our scuba gear?” Carrie lifted up a helmet. It had an elongated snout, like a dog’s muzzle. There was no sign of any masks or gas cylinders.

“If you are unable to breathe in water, place your respiration tablets in the receptacle in your helmets, and check that you can breathe normally before entering the pool,” said Errruorerrrrrhch.

*Respiration tablets?* Carrie frowned. What did the Manager mean? Most of the other trainees were slipping directly into the water without the need for any artificial breathing device. Dave was searching through his Liaison Officer’s toolbox.

“Is this it?” He held up the item that Carrie had thought looked like a dishwasher tablet. The item that she had opened and broken.

“Yes,” said Errruorerrrrrhch. “Take it out of its wrapper and place it in the receptacle in your helmet. The tablet supplies your oxygen needs and removes carbon dioxide from the gases you exhale.”

Dave looked sidelong at Carrie’s forlorn face. “Actually,” he said to Errruorerrrrrhch. “Is it okay if I sit this out? I’m a terrible swimmer.” He passed his unopened tablet to Carrie.

Carrie sighed as she pushed his hand away. She couldn’t let her friend cover up for her stupid mistakes, and she didn’t want him to give up on learning to swim.

“Errruorerrrrrh, I don’t have my respirator tablet. I opened it earlier. I’m sorry.”

The alien chittered. “I will request another from Supplies. Please wait for it to be delivered.”

“Honestly, Carrie, you can have mine,” said Dave as Errruorerrrrrhch left. “I’ve had enough for today. I don’t want to get in there again, especially not to go diving.”

Pulling on her wetsuit, Carrie replied, “Look, you did so well in the first session. Don’t stop now. Learning to swim is actually harder than

diving. When you're swimming, you have to use your arms and legs at the same time. Under water you just kick your legs to move around. No strokes or anything like that."

Dave grimaced as he peered at the trainees who were sinking to the bottom of the pool. Carrie looked down too. There seemed to be an obstacle course down there. "I don't know," said Dave. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Then now's a good time to start," said Carrie brightly. "Come on, you've actually enjoyed yourself a bit so far, haven't you?"

Her friend nodded. "It's been a lot more fun than I thought it would be."

*Probably because you're ninety-seven per cent suited to being a Liaison Officer,* thought Carrie. A small robot carrier bearing a respirator tablet appeared at her side.

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

Carrie smiled at her friend, her face tight.

## Chapter Ten – Falling Out

CARRIE SWUNG HER LEGS over the side of the top bunk and stretched pleasantly. She was sleeping well on the Council starship and had no worries about her dog, Rogue, or her cat, Toodles, missing her while she was away. When the Council sent her home via transgalactic gateway only a minute or two would have passed on Earth. Dave was already dressed and was combing his hair. The dirty clothes and other bits and bobs she had left on the floor had been mysteriously put away overnight.

“So, what are we doing today?” she asked.

Dave tutted. “Don’t tell me you still haven’t read the itinerary. We’ve been here four days.”

“I did read it. I’ve just forgotten,” Carrie lied. She’d intended to read the itinerary. She just hadn’t got around to it yet.

Checking his face for stubble, her friend said, “All it says for today is ‘practical training’.”

She jumped down with a thump. “I wonder what that is. Seems like most things we’ve done so far have been practical. Maybe I can ask Gavin at breakfast if he’s there. I haven’t seen him recently.” Carrie bent down to pick up a small green object that had fallen from underneath Dave’s bunk when she jumped.

“He’s got his work cut out with his nightmare kids, I should think,” said Dave. “That and preventing their mother from snacking on them at break.” He shuddered.

“What’s this?” Carrie gasped and turned, wide-eyed, to her friend. In her hand was the small green object. It was one of the weapons they had trained with.

Dave looked away quickly. “Wow, where did that come from?”

“Dave,” Carrie exclaimed. “you know full well where it came from. It just fell from your bed. When did you take it? When we were training?”

“Well, thanks a lot for jumping to conclusions! You don’t know I took it.”

“You do have a bit of history of that kind of thing, you know. And how would it get here otherwise? Why on Earth did you take a weapon? They’re incredibly dangerous. You’ll have to give it back.”

“Not if I didn’t take it,” replied her friend, his nostrils flaring.

“Of course you did. Stop playing games. You could get me into trouble too. Did you think about that?” Carrie exclaimed, her heart racing at the realisation that her friend had put her job at risk.

“Well, of all the cheek. Just because I have a medical condition I’m suddenly responsible for stealing every random item you come

across.” He put his hands on his hips. “I’m only here because of you. I’ve been to all the training exercises, even spending hours in a freezing swimming pool. I’ve put up with your disgusting habits all week—”

“DISGUSTING.”

“Yes, disgusting. Strands of hair left in the sink, yesterday’s clothes lying on the floor, rubbish scattered about. In all the times I’ve visited you at home, Carrie, I never said anything about your flat. Your place, your rules, I thought. But I’m telling you now that, frankly, it’s awful. I know you have pets, but that’s no excuse.”

“How dare you. I might be a little messy, but I am NOT disgusting. And at least I don’t have OCD. Arranging all my possessions in a neat little pattern every night.” She screwed up her eyes and nose as she mimicked placing objects on a surface. “Everything in EXACTLY the same place. Honestly, Dave, you’ll make some man a lovely HOUSEKEEPER someday. AND I’ve noticed your disgust doesn’t stop you from eating me out of house and home whenever you’re over. Biscuits don’t grow on trees you know.”

Dave’s eyes widened and his mouth formed an O. “IF I ate all your biscuits, which I DON’T, I’d be doing you a favour,” he exclaimed. “You could do WITHOUT eating so many biscuits if you ask me.” He poked her in the belly.

Carrie drew in a great breath of air, ready to explode with indignation. But her outrage was so great she couldn’t speak. Her mouth worked, but the words wouldn’t come, and she stood rigid, glaring at Dave with her hands clenched and her mouth wide open.

Dave glared back at her. “Yes? Was there something you wanted to say?”

Still words couldn’t convey Carrie’s ire, and she closed and opened her mouth like a fish out of water. She looked so comical, Dave’s anger melted and his lips twitched as he tried to prevent a smile. Seeing this, a great snort of laughter burst from Carrie, and she grabbed her mouth. Her friend also began to chuckle, and soon guffaws gripped them both until they were weeping with mirth. They clung to each other as they laughed.

Finally Carrie caught her breath enough to speak. She wiped her eyes as she said, “Seriously, though, what are you going to do with it? You can’t keep it here.”

Sighing, Dave replied, “I don’t know. What do you think I should do?”

Carrie sat down on his bed and turned the weapon over in her hands. “It is an amazing thing, isn’t it? So small, and yet powerful enough to penetrate a placktoid.” Dave sat beside her. Carrie looked at him from the corners of her eyes. “You haven’t taken anything else,

have you?"

"Of course not," he exclaimed. When Carrie's eyes didn't move, his facial muscles relaxed. "I haven't, honestly."

"The thing is, I don't understand," she said. "You're such a together person. You're so level-headed and sensible. You don't seem to have any baggage or problems. People with kleptomania are messed up in some way, as far as I understand it."

Dave shrugged. "I don't know that I really have kleptomania. I've never been diagnosed. I just find certain things irresistibly fascinating. Neat, complex, clever things, you know? And there's a challenge to it—taking things without anyone noticing, I mean. It's such a thrill to succeed. I don't think it's such a bad thing to do. I never keep anything for long. I always put back whatever I've taken, eventually."

Carrie watched her friend closely as he spoke. This was a side to him she had never seen. When he stopped she smiled and gave him a sideways shove with her shoulder. "There's a lot more to you than meets the eye, isn't there? I wonder what Gavin would have to say if he knew you were a closet thrill-seeker. You're supposed to be the one who keeps me grounded."

"I am sensible most of the time." He took the weapon from her hand. "Not sure what I'm going to do now, though. I suppose I'll have to 'fess up. I doubt I'll be able to put it back without being seen. And it wouldn't be right to take it back home with me."

"Don't tell them. You'll get kicked off the programme." Carrie frowned. "I know. Leave it somewhere. Somewhere it'll be found quickly."

"That's no good. They'll know someone stole it, and they'll test the DNA on it and find out it was me. I don't know how to clean it to make sure there's no trace of anything left."

"Doesn't matter. Your DNA—and mine, now—your DNA being on it doesn't prove anything. We were all taking weapons out of that store. All the weapons have trainees' DNA on them."

Putting his hand slowly to his chin, Dave nodded. "Maybe you're right. Okay, it's worth a try. Maybe I could find a place in the canteen or another communal room where I can put it." He stood.

"Do it now, before we go to the practical training session."

But her friend was looking away from the door and towards a wall. "Too late. Look at that. I thought it was only a mirror." He was looking at the communication screen. Carrie leaned out from the bunk to read the message.

ARRIVED AT GAGINION. REPORT TO THE LEVEL 2  
CENTRAL AIRLOCK FOR PRACTICAL TRAINING.

She leaped up. "We're on a planet. That's what they meant by

practical training.”

“Of course,” said Dave. “The itinerary didn’t go into any detail.”

“All this time we thought we were just floating in space, we’ve been travelling somewhere,” Carrie exclaimed. “I wonder what it looks like.” She ran to the cabin window and ripped off the T-shirt Dave had hung over it. The sight that greeted her made her stagger back. Beyond the starship was not the alien landscape she had expected.

Slowly, she returned to the window and pressed her face against the surface, flattening her nose. She gazed out into an aquatic, shadowy expanse. Pale green, rippling light came from above, lighting the area around the ship for a short distance. Beyond was darkness, where Carrie could make out only vague, moving shapes. She looked down into black, seemingly bottomless depths.

“Bloody hell,” said Dave.

## Chapter Eleven – Carrie’s Off

“GAGINION IS HOME TO seventeen sentient species,”

Errruorerrrrrhch explained to the trainees waiting at the airlock, wearing wetsuits or only their Transgalactic Liaison Officer swimsuits as appropriate to their species. Carrie and Dave, as humans, needed the protection of wetsuits against the chill water. “The predominant species, marsoliie, have divided into two factions, Singles and Groups. The Singles have applied to the Council for mediation with the Group marsoliie—”

“The same species?” asked Carrie.

“Yes, the same species. The information is on your briefing device. We were uncertain whether we would be able to provide this training until very recently, and we uploaded the necessary details only this morning. Please take a moment to read through all the information before leaving on your assignment. You have plenty of time. But to give you an overview, Group marsoliie believe their species is most successful, happy and fulfilled when conjoined with others of their species, in groups of indiscriminate numbers. The Groups believe they evolved to exist together once they have reached maturity, and that living as a Single once adulthood is attained is an unnatural, abhorrent and unhealthy practice.

“Single marsoliie, as is often the case in intracultural disputes, believes the exact opposite: that living as a Single organism is the normal and natural state of affairs—”

“Can’t they just live and let live?” Carrie asked. “I mean, the Singles live alone and the Groups join up?”

A pause followed this second interruption, and the trainees turned to look at Carrie.

“IF I could explain,” continued Errruorerrrrrhch, “the central problem seems to reside in the fact that the Group marsoliie feel they must *help* the Single marsoliie to a better life by capturing them and adding them to their number. This physical coercion is obviously illegal, but it is very difficult to prove. Once a Single’s neural network is joined to the Group, it retains no memory of itself as a Single, but instead it remembers, thinks and feels as one of the Group.”

“Oh, I see,” said Carrie.

Errruorerrrrrhch turned her giant insect head towards her, waited a moment, and continued. “Though the marsoliie have achieved interstellar travel, they employ little technology in their day-to-day lives. Neither do they have any centralised government nor legal system. Disputes are resolved on a case-by-case basis within communities. These small, local disputes are happening across the

planet. Though serious, the Council does not currently have the staff numbers to address the issue. Therefore, we deemed this liaison request as an appropriate practical training exercise for new Officers.

“Your assignment is essentially to attend community talks between the Singles and Groups and ensure there is fair play. A further reason we have chosen this assignment for you is that the Unity soldiers who are currently doing all they can to protect the Single marsoliie from assimilation are spread extremely thin, due to the placktoid threat. Your presence should be a further deterrent.”

Carrie opened her mouth, but decided against speaking, and closed it again.

“A plentiful supply of respirator tablets is available for those who need them. I repeat, please read your briefing documents thoroughly before leaving the ship and travelling to the coordinates programmed into your briefing device. Underwater scramblers are available outside the airlock.”

“What are they?” asked Carrie. “Like aquatic motorbikes or something?”

“I believe you could say so,” answered Errruorerrrrrhch.

“Cool,” exclaimed Carrie. She had put on only the lower half of her wetsuit. The upper half hung down from her hips. She pulled it up and slipped her arms into the sleeves. “Hey, if we run out of respirator tablets, it isn’t that much of a problem, is it? I mean, we can just swim up to the surface, right?”

“Gaginion’s atmosphere is composed almost entirely of carbon dioxide. I do not think it would offer a human much benefit if you were attempt to breathe it.”

“Oh...okay.” Carrie zipped the wetsuit up to her chin and picked up her helmet.

“Don’t you think you should read the briefing first?” asked Dave.

“No, it’s fine. Errruorerrrrrhch told us the important parts, and I can read the rest on the way.” She put on her helmet and picked up her fins. Dave reached over, pulled the helmet off her head and put it down on the floor.

“Carrie, read the briefing document.”

“Hey...oh...fine.” Putting down her fins, she pulled the tablet of clear plastic out of her Liaison Officer toolbox, thumbed it until she reached the correct screen and hastily scanned the text. The other trainees milled around, getting ready to leave. Carrie paged ahead to images of the marsoliie. The briefing device played a video of a bright scarlet creature moving through water. It looked similar to a starfish except that it had eight legs, and they were frilled and flexible. The animal swam by undulating its legs and body, and it travelled in a delicate, pulsating flurry of movement. “Wow, amazing.” As Carrie



watched, a set of joined marsoliie appeared. The Group was a large ball of billowing legs. It approached the Single, grabbing one its legs with several of its own. After drawing the Single close, it attached the centre of its body to its mass. The conjoined animals then beat their legs as one and disappeared out of the frame. Carrie nodded. "I see."

She picked up her helmet and fins and grabbed a handful of respirator tablets, which she shoved into her Liaison Officer toolbox. She said a quick goodbye to Dave and, banging her fist on the airlock door, she called, "Open up." A scent of salty gardenias came from the translator in her toolbox, and the door hissed open. She stepped inside, and Audrey rolled in with her. Like everything else that Audrey carried, her toolbox was somewhere inside her. Her huge wetsuit covered most of her body. A portion of green poked through a hole, and, for Carrie's benefit, Audrey formed it into a human-like head and gave Carrie a smile.

The other trainees were still reading their briefing devices and getting ready. Carrie didn't want to wait, so she told the door to close. "Good luck," she said to Audrey. She burped in reply, which Carrie's translated relayed to her mind as "Thanks, you too."

"Wait a moment, please, Carrie," said a familiar voice. Gavin and his children had appeared. The airlock door was closing.

"Sorry, I'm going on an assignment," Carrie said. "No time to talk."

"I wanted to inform you—"

"I'll see you when I get back." The airlock door closed, shutting out the light from the corridor. Only the pale air lock light and the watery green beams through the window illuminated the space. Water began to enter the chamber from vents in the outer door. Carrie put on her fins and helmet, ripped open a respirator tablet and popped it into the receptacle in front of her mouth and nose. The water had risen to her knees. Audrey floated on the surface, bobbing gently. Carrie pulled her bag's strap over her head and zipped it closed. She wasn't going to risk all her useful devices disappearing into the ocean.

She grinned at Audrey, who bumped her in return. The water rose higher until she, too, was floating. She dipped her head beneath the surface, breathing deeply as she did so. Her respirator tablet was working, and the indicator was way over to the left, which meant it was at maximum capacity. When the needle reached the centre she was supposed to exchange the tablet for another, though she wouldn't be in any danger of oxygen starvation until the needle swung far to the right.

At last the water reached the top of the airlock and Carrie and Audrey were entirely submerged. The outer door began to open. As soon as there was room for her, Carrie slipped beneath it, giving Audrey a wave. Outside the starship, she stopped a moment to take

stock of her surroundings. Though mysterious depths sank away beneath her and watery shadows encircled, excitement surged through her at finally being free of the confines of the starship.

She spun to locate the aquatic motorbikes. As Errruorerrrrrhch had said, they were tethered to the starship, floating in a line. The underwater scooters were in a range of sizes and shapes. Two of them looked as though they were made for humans, and Carrie swam to the nearest one and strapped herself in. Her heart was racing. After far too many days of boring training, she was finally off to do her job.

Cautiously, she opened her bag and fished inside. She pulled out the briefing device and slotted it into a frame on the water scooter dashboard. Coordinates flashed. She gripped the machine's handles and rotated the right grip. It sprang forward, but stopped. Carrie looked back to see what the problem was. Her scooter was dragging at the others that were tethered to the line. Audrey, who had just boarded hers, had been bounced off and was floating away.

"Sorry," called Carrie as she released her scooter from its tether. She was off, zooming through the water.

## Chapter Twelve – Strange Encounters

ON HER WAY TO THE MEETING of Single and Group marsoliie, Carrie encountered other creatures living in the ocean. For a while her water scooter carried her underneath a large mass that she assumed was a raft of seaweed or another non-intelligent substance—until the mass began to shift and she heard a voice that sounded like the tinkling of bells. “You’re one of those Transgalactic Council Officers, aren’t you. Aren’t you going to introduce yourself?”

Carrie stopped her scooter. All around nothing else was visible but the slowly moving raft above her. She looked up at the dark vegetation. “Sorry, I didn’t notice...I mean, I didn’t think...I mean, sorry. Hello.”

“You’re here to stop the those marsoliie fighting, I assume? A good thing, too. They should all stay as Singles. A large Group gets in the way. Can’t go over it, can’t go under it. Have to go round it. Everyone would be much better off if they were all Singles.”

“We’re going to do what we can,” replied Carrie, wondering how big the Groups could grow if they got in the way of the monster above her. “I’m here to oversee a mediation meeting. But resources are stretched because of the problem with the placktoids.”

“I heard about that,” said the Thing above. “I’d like to see them try to come here. I’d soon deal with them.”

*I’m sure you would*, thought Carrie, gazing into the dark, amorphous shape. The green light of the alien sun filtered through the water at the edge of it, in the distance. “Well, it’s been nice meeting you, but I really must get on.” She started her scooter and whizzed forward.

A distance meter was ticking down on her display. According to the meter, she had nearly arrived at the meeting place, though she couldn’t yet see any sign of the marsoliie. She wondered what their dwellings looked like. This area of the ocean was quite shallow, and she had seen apparently artificial shapes below, but she didn’t know if they belonged to the marsoliie or another of the planet’s sentient species. Or even if they were constructed and not natural.

As she looked up, she spotted a mass of scarlet ahead. The right side of the mass was much larger than the left, which looked thin and wispy in comparison. As she drew closer the mass became more defined. To the right were large Groups of marsoliie, all their many legs writhing in a frilled throng. To the left were Singles, which were pulsating and flowing and floating in a beautiful synchronised dance.

Carrie slowed her scooter to get a better look at the Singles. A deep, smooth tenor voice sounded in her head, growing louder as she

approached. It was announcing the beginning of the meeting, “as the Transgalactic Council Officer has arrived.”

Floating forward on the last of her scooter’s momentum, Carrie was nearly among the marsoliie before a sudden realisation struck her: how was she supposed to speak to these aliens? Would they hear her through her helmet? Probably not. Did they use telepathy to talk to each other? Gavin had told her once that humans weren’t very telepathic. She frowned. Had there been something about communication media in the briefing document? Maybe she had skipped that part. She would just have to try her best.

She clipped her scooter’s tether to her belt and kicked her fins to bring her the last few metres to the waiting marsoliie. “Hi.” As she spoke, her right arm flipped up. Carrie blinked. She pulled her arm down. “I’m Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatch—oh my goodness.” Her arms had flown up, gesticulating wildly, and her body twisted round. At the same time her knees moved akimbo and both her legs kicked out. By the time the word ‘goodness’ was out of her mouth, she was upside down and facing away from the watching aliens.

Carrie caught her breath as she tried to understand what was happening. She spun round and turned herself right side up. “I—“ Her head flew back. “Would like—“ She shimmied. “To—“ Her hips ground. “Apologise for my behaviour.” She finished in a rush while she pirouetted, shuddered and turned a cartwheel.

“I’m not sure I understand you,” replied the Single marsoliie, undulating as his voice sounded in Carrie’s mind. “You have nothing to apologise for. Shall we start the meeting?”

Her body rigid, Carrie whispered, “Yes.” As the word left her lips, she gave the marsoliie the finger. With both hands. She gripped her arms to her chest. What was going on?

The marsoliie were motionless except for the Single who had apparently spoken. He began to billow and ripple in an elegant frolic. “We would like to begin the meeting by thanking our neighbourhood Groups for coming,” he said. “We hope we can resolve our differences amicably and to everyone’s satisfaction.”

Light began to dawn in Carrie’s mind. The marsoliie communicated through body language. Whenever she spoke her translator prompted her body to move, conveying the meaning of her words to the marsoliie. With her new understanding, her heart slowed. She hadn’t been incredibly rude. In the marsoliie’s eyes—or whatever it was they saw with—she’d been acting normally. She exhaled with relief. She couldn’t afford to mess this up, what with her being on *remedial training*. Her lips tightened.

A Group marsoliie began to move its legs in delicate

synchronisation. “We certainly hope so too. We’d like to take the opportunity to explain our position and clear up any misunderstandings you may have.”

“Well, we’re happy to listen to whatever you have to say,” replied the Single. “So, let’s each start by stating our viewpoints. Would you like to go first?”

“Thank you,” said the Group. “I’d like to begin by making it clear we are only acting according to the facts stated in the *Natural Lives of Marsoliie*.”

A Single to one side shivered, and Carrie heard, “You can hardly call them facts.”

The Group ignored the comment and continued, “It’s well known that Group marsoliie are healthier, live longer and reproduce more often. We have the benefit of enhanced intelligence through the amalgamation of minds and shared histories and experiences, and we use up fewer resources because we’re more efficient. Communal living is good for everyone, and it’s the natural way. This is how our species evolved to be. Remaining Single at maturity is a deviation. It’s bad for you. We just want to help you understand that.”

The Group expanded its argument, and Carrie’s attention wandered. It was only repeating what Errruorerrrrrhch had already told her, just in a longer, more roundabout and boring way. Her gaze drifted down. Below were the square shapes that she supposed were marsoliie residences. On the same level as her, but on the far side of the marsoliie, was a silvery shape. With a jolt she realised the object wasn’t an animal or other natural inhabitant of Gaginion, it was an underwater scooter similar to her own.

Her head swivelling, she tried to find the scooter’s owner, but there didn’t seem to be any non-locals there except herself. A different voice began to speak, and her attention was drawn back to the meeting. It was the Single who seemed to represent the others. “On behalf of my fellow citizens I thank you for stating your views so concisely and eloquently.” This brought a shuddering among the Groups that Carrie’s translator conveyed as applause. “I’m happy to reassure you that I can be equally concise, if not more so.

“Our response is, even if we were to concede that everything you say is true—which we do not, though I agree there is research that seems to back up a little of what you say—even if we were to concede those points, it doesn’t change the fact that we have the right to choose what we do with our own bodies. It’s an inviolable right under Transgalactic Law, and adding Singles to your Groups without their consent is illegal, plain and simple.”

“Ah yes, I’m familiar with this argument,” replied the Group, “but it only applies if you consider your bodies to be your own, which

under marsoliie natural law, the law of our species, they are not.”

“Hey, get off me,” came a third voice. On the edge of the gathering a Group had approached a Single and was holding onto one of its legs. The Single was tugging to get away.

“Stop that over there,” called Carrie, performing a combination of star jumps and sit ups. Her arms and legs finally came to rest, and she saw movement near the two tussling marsoliie. It was the owner of the other water scooter. Invisible before due to his camouflage uniform, which was the colour of the sea, a Unity soldier was now visible against the background of the large Group. He was approaching the creature, a long staff with rounded tips in his hand. Carrie blinked and squinted. She’d been mistaken. The soldier wasn’t a man, it was a large woman.

The soldier jabbed the Group in the middle with his staff, but it didn’t relinquish its hold on the Single, who was beginning to turn limp. The Group pulled at the Single’s leg, and it allowed itself to be dragged closer. The soldier jabbed the Group again, harder.

“This is outrageous,” exclaimed the Single representative. “This is exactly the kind of thing we’re talking about. Command your colleague to withdraw at once.”

The attacking Group grabbed the staff, pulling the soldier towards it. She delivered a well-aimed kick, which broke the Group’s grasp. But another leg came up and quickly grasped the soldier around her middle.

“Hey,” shouted Carrie, and backflipped. As soon as she righted herself, she tugged on her tether, pulling her water scooter over. Clamping her lips shut to avoid the temptation to say anything else, she leapt onto her vehicle.

“Please don’t do that,” called the Group to its fellow, “I know you’re only trying to do the right thing, but now is not the time nor the place.”

Carrie was already on her way over to help the soldier. The Group had released the Single, which was moving lazily, as if coming to its senses. The Group continued to battle with the soldier, however. Its tentacles were wrapped round her leg, arm and hips, but the soldier was putting up a good fight. She managed to free her staff from the Group’s grip and drive it into its centre with a force that made Carrie wince. There was a roar, and the Group let go of the soldier’s arm and leg. Then the tentacle holding the soldier’s hips reeled in, drawing the soldier closer like a yoyo. She curled into a ball and turned head over heels, twisting the tentacle in a way that must have been very painful, for the Group finally let go. The soldier kneed the creature’s middle and shoved it away from her with the sole of her foot. It pulsed once, then swam off slowly.

“I apologise for that,” said the Group representative. Singles and Groups began chattering about the incident, and the meeting grew loud.

Impressed by the soldier’s fighting skills but not wanting to risk having her words turned into physical contortions, Carrie gave her a thumbs up.

## Chapter Thirteen – Blast From the Past

BY THE END OF THE MEETING, demarcation lines had been drawn up and agreed by the Group and Single marsoliie, with many expressions of sadness on the part of the Groups, who complained about the Singles' determination to 'divide the community'. Satisfied she had done a reasonable job—performing several strange and occasionally painful gyrations—and the discussion had positive outcome, Carrie headed back to the Council starship.

She hadn't gone far before her respirator indicator needle reached the centre of the dial. She stopped her water scooter to insert a new tablet. The machine floated idly round as she was fiddling with the receptacle in her helmet. After pulling out the old tablet and slotting the new one in place, she glanced up. Behind her was the silver vehicle of the Unity soldier, who was following in her wake. She waited to allow the soldier time to catch up, wondering what she was doing. Was the Unity starship in the same vicinity as the Council's? The woman reached Carrie, but she didn't stop. She sped past without even a glance in Carrie's direction.

Carrie shrugged and started up her vehicle. Her coordinates led her along the same route at the soldier. The Council starship emerged from the gloom ahead. The soldier was heading straight for it. Frowning, Carrie tried to remember if she had seen any Unity presence on board. She was sure she hadn't. Maybe the soldier was lost? But if that was the case, why didn't she stop and ask Carrie for help?

Curiosity gripping her, she turned her water scooter up to full speed, and sped off after the soldier. By the time she caught up, they were both at the ship. Hoping that as there were no marsoliie nearby her words wouldn't be converted to body language, she called out, "Hi, I'm Carrie." The soldier didn't reply, so she added, "Thanks for your help back there."

They were outside the airlock, and the soldier must have radioed her arrival because it was opening. Together, they swam in. The outer door closed, and the water began to drain out. Still the soldier said nothing. Carrie surreptitiously studied her form and enigmatic, opaque visor. The woman seemed familiar. Had she been on the squashpump planet during the hostage siege? Then realisation dawned. As the woman pulled off her helmet and her tawny gold hair tumbled about her shoulders, Carrie exclaimed, "Belinda."





“I DON’T BELIEVE THAT woman.” Carrie threw her wet toolbox into the shower room, where it landed with a crash.

Eyeing the bag, which was dripping seawater, Dave asked “Who?” before returning to arranging his Council Officer’s devices on the top of his locker.

“Belinda!”

“Belinda?” Dave stopped what he was doing and turned to face her. “Not...?”

“Yes, that Belinda,” Carrie said, her eyes ablaze. “Half-dandrobian Belinda who Gavin brought in to take over from me. The Belinda who wouldn’t let us get on board the paperclip with her to go the placktoid ship. The Belinda who refused to listen to the poor ootoon. THAT Belinda.” She sat down with a thump on Dave’s bunk.

“Don’t sit there, you’re all wet.”

Carrie had forgotten she was still in her wetsuit. “Ugh, sorry. I’ll have a shower.” She grabbed a towel and went in, closing the door. “Hey, it’s really clean in here,” she called. While showering, she continued to talk loudly, telling Dave that Belinda was a Unity soldier now, and about her fight with the Group marsoliie, and how she came back to the Council starship and completely ignored Carrie while they were in the airlock, marching off as soon as the inner door was open. She came out of the shower room, rubbing her hair.

“Well, it certainly sounds like she hasn’t changed much,” said Dave.

“You can say that again,” Carrie replied, dropping the towel on the floor. “But why’s she here if she’s a Unity soldier now? This is a Council ship.”

“Maybe she had to deliver a message?” Dave pulled the weapon he had stolen out from under his bunk. He lay down and began to examine it.

“Hey, haven’t you got rid of that yet?” asked Carrie.

“I haven’t had a chance.” He held the green object up to the light. “What a feat of design, though, don’t you think? So much power packed into such a small package. I wonder how it works?” He brought it closer to his eyes and peered at it.

“Don’t go trying to open it up, for goodness sake,” said Carrie. “You could release deadly radiation, or blow up the ship.” She brushed her hair. “Honestly, Dave, you have to get rid of it, and quickly.”

“No time now. We have to go for a meeting.”

“Really? I thought we were finished for the day.”

“Yes, really. It’s in the itinerary. It’s a plenary session to go over our experiences during the practical training.”

Carrie stopped brushing and sighed. "A plenary session, like where everyone gets together and talks? I hate those."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Come on, it's going to start in five minutes."

Flattening the stubborn kink in her hair with her hands, Carrie said, "Okay, I'm ready."

"Aren't you going to put your stuff away?"

"What stuff?"

Dave picked up the towel and Carrie's pyjamas from the floor and pushed them into her hands.

"Oh, *that* stuff," she said, smiling sheepishly.

As they left their cabin, Gavin appeared round a corner in the corridor. His children seemed to have swollen since Carrie had last seen them. She speculated that they must be approaching their first moult. Gavin was moving more slowly than usual, possibly finally feeling their weight. "Carrie, I would like to have a little chat with you."

"Sorry, Gavin," said Dave, grabbing Carrie's arm and pulling her along. "No time. We're late for a meeting." He shuddered as they left the insectoid alien behind. "I hope we go home before those things grow up and leave Daddy."

They were the last to arrive at the plenary session. It had already begun, and the trainees were taking turns to talk about what they had learned during the mediation process. The faceless hairy alien, who didn't seem to have a name, was explaining how he had successfully guided the marsoliie to split into small teams of several Singles and one Group, and discuss their feelings. Next it was the turn of the squashpump. She had encouraged the marsoliie to brainstorm words they associated with the current conflict. As the squashpump spoke, Carrie felt a yawn rising in the back of her throat. Why did people have to go into so much detail about everything? Dave nudged her. Carrie's attention returned to the meeting. There was an expectant silence. It was her turn to speak. "Oh, erm, well, my Groups and Singles came to an agreement to, to divide up the territory and stay out of each other's way, until they—"

"That is a satisfactory interim outcome," interrupted Errruorerrrrhch, "but can you explain what you *did* to facilitate this productive discussion the marsoliie apparently had?"

Carrie blinked. She tried to remember what she had said. "Erm, well, I'm not sure I did anything in particular. It just seemed to happen." There were some titters. Her face grew hot. "I made sure they listened to each other, mostly." She waited for the inevitable cutting remark from Errruorerrrrhch. But what else could she have said? It was true. She had done very little talking. The Singles and Groups had come to the agreement by themselves. All she had done,

after the Group's fight with the Single and Belinda, was to interfere as little as possible as long as the two sides were prepared to listen.

But Errruorerrrrrhch wasn't paying attention to her anyway. The manager's head had swivelled from horizontal to vertical, which meant she was communicating with someone or something far off. Her head resumed its normal position, and she spoke. "It seems we have a new recruit to the training programme. She is approaching at this moment so I will take this opportunity to introduce you." The door at the back of the room opened, and the trainees turned to see who would enter. " I would like you to welcome..." A figure appeared. Carrie's spine stiffened. The new trainee had exchanged her black and silver Unity uniform for the fluorescent orange of the Council. She paused, presumably for effect, in the doorway, statuesque and beautiful. "...Belinda."

## Chapter Fourteen – Too Close For Comfort

CARRIE, DAVE, AUDREY and the ootoon sat at one table at dinner, Belinda, the hairy thing, the squashpump and the insectoid alien sat at another. The light was by itself in the corner, flashing intermittently. Recharging? Carrie wondered. Belinda had her table in stitches with stories she was telling, and from the glances Carrie received from that direction, it seemed most of the stories were about her.

“I bet she’s telling them about my first assignment,” she said to Dave.

He shrugged. “What if she is? You uncovered the truth about what the placktoids were doing and revealed they had developed or stolen gateway technology. You did a great job, in the end.”

Carrie frowned at the final three words of her friend’s comment. “Yes, I did discover all of that. Not that anyone at the Council seems to appreciate it. Or else I wouldn’t be here.”

Dave became very interested in his meal, which was strange because it tasted like something that had already been eaten.

“So, you didn’t get time to talk about what you did today, Dave,” said Carrie, “what with Belinda hogging the end of the session telling everyone about her transfer.”

“Are you talking about that new recruit?” asked Audrey. “Didn’t she say she’s half-dandrobian? I thought it was very interesting that she worked as a Liaison Officer before she decided on a career change and became a Unity soldier. Then she came back to the Council because resolving disputes peacefully is her true vocation. So cool.”

*Oh yes, very cool,* thought Carrie. She wondered whether Belinda’s poor performance on her assignment with the ootoon and placktoids had contributed to her ‘career change’ idea.

“We know all that,” said the box of ootoon. “We were there at the plenary session, too, you know. Where were we? No, I don’t remember that. Who are we talking about? The new one. Pay attention.”

Carrie sometimes wished she could fix her translator to screen out the ootoon. Listening to it explain how it had mediated for the marsoliie had been a farce. It couldn’t agree with itself over what had actually happened. It was wonderful that the creature(s) had decided to separate itself from the rest of...itself...back on its planet, to help the Council deal with the placktoids, but she couldn’t see how it could help, practically.

“SO,” she said, steeping her fingers, “what did you do today, Dave?”

Her friend put down his fork, gratefully, it seemed. “Well, you know, I just reasoned with them. Got them to explain their

perspective, then to try to see things from the other side's point of view. They talked about what had happened in the past. The Singles said how they had lost their friends to Groups, and the Groups explained how they felt they'd enriched the life of every Single who joined them." He shook his head slightly. "I can't say they came to any firm resolutions by the end of the meeting, but I think it calmed tensions a lot."

Carrie sighed. "That sounds really good." She rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "I wish I'd thought of that." But of course Dave was better than her at being a Liaison Officer. Hadn't his brain scan found he was ninety-seven per cent compatible with the job, while her result was only thirty-four?

Something ran over Carrie's foot, and she jumped. She peered under the table and blanched at the sight of one of Gavin's children climbing her trouser leg. Turning, she saw her Manager had entered the canteen. His offspring were scattering from him as he came, climbing onto tables and chairs and up the walls.

"Right, well, I'm stuffed," said Dave, pushing his nearly full plate away. "See you later." He stood, then froze rigid. His eyes sought Carrie's in a wild, desperate stare as his face turned white. She gave a small scream and pointed. A baby insectoid alien was scaling his shoulder, its little antennae waving.

"Oh, that is adorable," said Gavin as he approached. "She does not usually climb on other people. She must like you."

Sweat beaded on Dave's forehead. His eyes pleaded with Carrie. She gently removed the bug that was crawling up her trousers and placed it on the floor before reaching for the one on her friend. "I'll see if I can—"

"No, no," said Gavin, "please do not remove them yourselves. It is important that they learn to do as they are told."

"Right," said Dave through his teeth.

An aroma of roast beef mixed with aniseed filled the air as Gavin spoke to the errant child in his species' language. Carrie's translator conveyed the words to her mind. "Now then, Jessica, I am certain the nice gentleman would prefer it if you did not climb on him. Is that not so?" The final remark was in English and addressed at Dave, who gave a stiff nod. "So you must climb down immediately."

But instead of climbing down, the insect scrambled higher, up Dave's neck and onto his head. Carrie wondered if he would actually faint. She prepared to catch him.

"Jessica. Did you hear me?" Gavin's child sat in Dave's hair, where it seemed to be practising moving its inner jaws in and out, catching a few strands each time. Dave trembled. "I do apologise. She is about to moult, and at this stage they can be rather difficult to control."

"I see," squeaked Dave.

"I am afraid it is necessary that I use a threat. Most regrettable, but I can see no alternative. I am a first-time father, you see, and unaccustomed to—"

"Go right ahead." Dave's tone was strangled.

"Jessica, if you do not descend from the nice gentleman immediately I will be forced to...to take you to see your mother." Almost too fast to be seen, the young alien scampered down Dave, across the floor and out of the room. Like a building demolished with explosives, Dave collapsed to his chair, but he quickly recovered and grabbed his bag as if to leave. Turning, he stopped and staggered. The canteen was being overrun with Gavin's children. They were playing tag, eating leftovers and swinging from the backs of chairs. Dave clutched his bag to his chest and he slowly resumed his seat, his eyes darting to and fro all the while, as if searching for an escape route.

"I am pleased that we finally have time for a private chat, Carrie," said Gavin. Audrey and the ootoon took the hint and left the table.

"Oh, yes, I remember, did you want to tell me something?"

"I was hoping to inform you about your colleague, Belinda, before you encountered her. I was aware you would both be present at the marsoliie meeting. Your initial encounter on the ootoon planet was quite unfortunate, and I was hoping to smooth the path towards a reconciliation between the two of you. After all, your Liaison Officer roles involve improving relations and resolving differences amicably. It would be regrettable if we were unable to set a good example in this area within our own ranks, do you not think so?"

Gavin's words hit home, and Carrie bit her lip. He was right. She should be trying to be friends, not holding onto a grudge against Belinda, no matter how hard the half-dandrobian made it for her. She really wasn't a very good Liaison Officer. "Yes, you're right, I suppose. But why was she working as a Unity soldier? And what's she doing here?" Gavin would know the truth, and he wouldn't put a gloss on it.

"Hmm...well, it is not appropriate for me to tell you the personal details of another member of staff, but her performance during your first assignment was not satisfactory, and she appeared unable to take responsibility for her behaviour. She resigned in order to try soldiering with the Unity. That role was apparently not a good fit for her either, and she requested a transfer back to the Council. As we are currently running a recruitment drive, and it looks as though one of the candidates here will not pass the programme, we felt it was an opportune moment to accept her application. By attending the remedial training her former faults will be addressed and hopefully Belinda can rejoin the Council."

Gavin continued to talk about how Belinda could catch up on the

courses she'd missed, but Carrie didn't hear him. All she could hear was his voice echoing in her head: *one of the candidates here will not pass the training*. Did he mean her? He must mean her. But if he meant her, why would he just come right out and say it like that? *He means someone else*, she decided, *or he wouldn't tell me*. Then another thought struck her—this must be Gavin's way of warning her that she was going to fail if she didn't improve. Her heart sank. Another of her Manager's children began climbing her leg, but she didn't notice.

She was already trying her best. How was she supposed to do better?

## Chapter Fifteen – A Wet Mess

OVERNIGHT, THE TRANSGALACTIC Council starship moved to a new location on Gaginion. Lying in her bunk, Carrie felt the ship's motion through the water. It rose and fell gently, but the soothing movement didn't help her sleep. Over the course of the week, her anger about being made to do remedial training had been replaced by anxiety that the decision had been correct, that she was actually useless at her job. And now her fear was heightened by Belinda's presence. It would be bad enough to fail, but it would be soul-destroying if Belinda passed but she didn't.

She turned onto her side and listened to the sound of Dave's breathing in the bunk below, reminding her of the weapon he had stolen and still hadn't got rid of. Her focus of worry shifted. Dave was a much better Liaison Officer than her, his stealing habit aside. He deserved to do the job, and it seemed as though he was getting over his wariness and enjoying himself. But if he was found with that weapon he'd be kicked off the course at the very least. That would be wrong. He could be a real asset to the Council.

Eventually, she began to drift off and her thoughts became dream-like. As an image of Dave, Belinda and herself standing in a triangle, throwing the weapon to each other like a bomb about to explode, swam hazily through her mind, she fell asleep.

Due to her bad night, Carrie overslept again the next morning. After waking her twice, Dave had to shake her to make her get up and get ready. They were continuing with their practical training that day. The ship had moved to an area of the planet that had a dense population of marsoliie, and Errruorerrrrrhch explained at the airlock that relations between the Singles and Groups in this region were particularly strained. If the Council mediation attempt wasn't successful, civil war was likely to break out.

"Ordinarily, we would not assign such a sensitive mediation process to trainees, but there are insufficient experienced staff available to address this problem. You have not been able to follow galactic news while aboard ship, but I can tell you that the Council and Unity continue to comb the galaxy for the placktoids without success. It is feared that, wherever they are, the placktoids are approaching a major move to assume complete control of galactic resources and affairs.

"But, to return to your assignments for the day, due to the more strained relations, where a Unity soldier is not available to assist we have selected two trainees to work together. You will be in radio contact. Please consult your briefing devices for more detailed



information. Now, are there any questions?”

Carrie eagerly pulled out her transparent tablet. It would make sense to pair her with Dave. They knew each other and shared a room. She scanned the screen. Yes! She did have a partner, and it was—

“Hurry up,” said Belinda. “I want to get this over with as soon as possible.” The half-dandrobian shoved a helmet at her.

Carrie’s face fell. Of all the trainees they could have picked, it had to be her. She put the device back in her bag and snatched the helmet out of Belinda’s hands. Then she remembered Gavin’s words about getting along with her colleagues. That was easy enough when you were working with reasonable people, but Belinda took the biscuit in rudeness, arrogance and downright pigheadedness.

Outside the starship, Carrie slowly kicked her way over to the water scooters. Belinda swam past her and had hopped aboard a water scooter and zoomed away while Carrie was still fixing her briefing tablet in her dashboard. *Damn that woman. Can’t she wait five minutes?*

The coordinates flashed, and Carrie set off. The water in this part of the planet was murkier than the previous place they had worked. She squinted as she peered through the gloom. Belinda was already quite far ahead, her vehicle glinting in the green light from above. Carrie increased her speed to try to catch up to her, but Belinda was going at full throttle, and she couldn’t close the gap. The two travelled along for some time before there was a flash of brilliant light to Carrie’s left.

Turning her head for a closer look, she caught her breath. Not far distant from her was a collection of small water creatures. In the glow fading from the flash, she could see them moving into a new, intricately detailed pattern. A second brilliant flash came, and Carrie shielded her eyes. What the animals were doing, she didn’t know. Maybe it was courtship or mating behaviour, or maybe they were communicating with far distant members of their species, or maybe even her. Whatever the behaviour was for, it was beautiful and fascinating to watch.

Carrie gazed at the creatures’ display for a short while before reluctantly drawing her eyes away. She had to get to the marsoliie meeting. If it were not for that, she could have stayed and watched them all day. Searching ahead, she could see no sign whatsoever of Belinda now. She started up her vehicle and sped onward. Her distance counter indicated she was already quite near. She should be able to see the marsoliie somewhere ahead, but there was no sign of them. Deciding it must be due to the murky water, she pressed on. But after another few moments’ travel, when her distance counter stood at zero, she still saw nothing but empty ocean.

Stopping her waterscooter, she peered at her coordinates. She was

sure the numbers were different from those displayed when she set off. As she watched, the numbers flickered and changed. She was right. They were different. But what did the fact they were changing mean? Was the marsoliie meeting moving?

Carrie hesitated. The obvious thing to do would be to contact Belinda by radio and ask her what was happening. But the thought of admitting she was lost left a bad taste in her mouth. She started up her scooter again and set off, following the new coordinates. Soon after, the coordinates changed again. Carrie hoped the new position was closer to her, or that at least that the marsoliie weren't moving so quickly she would never catch them up.

"Where are you?" Belinda's voice burst in her ear. "I've been waiting for you to arrive to begin the meeting. The marsoliie are very tense."

"I'm on my way, but..." The coordinates changed yet again.

"But what? Hey, keep back." Belinda's exclamation was accompanied by a rushing sound as, Carrie presumed, Belinda's translator converted her words to body language.

"Are you moving?" Carrie asked. "I keep seeing new coordinates."

"Moving? No, we've been in the same—stop that immediately. On behalf of the Transgalactic Council, I demand..." The rest of Belinda's words were lost in a swishes and bubbles.

Carrie gripped the handles on her water scooter. If the marsoliie weren't moving, why was she constantly seeing new numbers?

"Damn it, Carrie, get over here. The Groups are taking over the Singles. I can't control them by myself."

"I'm trying, but there's something wrong with my briefing device. It keeps changing the coordinates."

"Arghh...keep away. Turn it off and on again you idiot. I'm recording this, you know."

Carrie hoped the final comment was directed at the marsoliie and not her. Belinda's advice about her briefing device was sound. Why hadn't she thought of it before? After quickly thumbing the plastic tablet off and on, the coordinates seemed to finally stabilise. She set off at full speed. But how many Singles had been taken by Groups while she'd been lost?

In front of her was a reddish patch of ocean that was growing larger. She let out a sigh of relief. This had to be the meeting place. As she drew close, however, her hands clenched to fists on her scooter handlebars. All she could see was Groups, everywhere. She scanned again for Singles, but she couldn't see any at all. Belinda was waiting for her among them, her hands on her hips.

"Don't tell me..." Carrie said as reached her colleague.

"I did my best, but you weren't here to help."

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault my briefing device wasn’t working properly.”

“You took your time figuring it out. Why didn’t you contact me sooner?”

“Because I...I...” Carrie couldn’t see Belinda’s face very well, but she was sure she heard a sneer in her tone. “You said you were recording them. Maybe the Council can use the evidence to make them give up the Singles they took?”

“It was an empty threat, and they knew it. The marsoliie are indistinguishable, and the Singles will already have lost all memory of what happened.” She climbed aboard her water scooter. Her head facing forward, away from Carrie, she said, “I knew you were incompetent from the moment I saw you out of uniform on Ootoon. The success you had on that mission was pure luck, and you managed to tarnish my perfect record along the way. I predicted it wouldn’t be long until you messed up, and I was right.” She sped away, parting a collection of pulsating Group marsoliie as she went.

At first, Carrie seethed at Belinda’s words, but as she returned to the Council starship her anger faded and her heart grew heavy.

## Chapter Sixteen – About Face

CARRIE DIDN'T DARE hope Belinda would spare her when it came to feeding back to Errruorerrrrrhch and the other trainees about their encounter with the marsoliie, and she was right. The half-dandrobian went into excruciating detail as she related how she had been forced to single-handedly try to prevent the Groups from attacking the Singles, all the while waiting and waiting for her colleague to appear and lend a hand. She explained how, when Carrie had finally made contact, she'd had to advise her on the simple and obvious solution to equipment malfunction. She described how Carrie had appeared on the scene long after it was too late to save the Singles. She concluded with the fact that, as the Singles were in the last stages of losing their minds to the Groups who had captured them, they cursed the Transgalactic Council for allowing their entrapment.

Belinda didn't embellish her story with additional details. She didn't need to. Carrie's impulsive decision to forge ahead and not think carefully about what she was doing was apparent to every listener, none more so than herself. By the time Belinda stopped speaking, every eye on was on Carrie. She hung her head low, wilting under their gaze. Gavin had been right. The trainee who was going to fail was her. There was no doubt in her mind now.

"And what did you learn from your experiences today, Officer Hatchett?" Errruorerrrrrhch asked.

Carrie looked up. The other trainees waited patiently for her to speak. But she had nothing to say. There was nothing she *could* say that would justify her behaviour, nor return the captured Singles to their former status. She didn't know why she had even come to the session. It was all over for her. She lifted her bag to her shoulder, stood up and walked out.

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"CARRIE, I KNOW YOU'RE awake," said Dave.

She opened her eyes to see her friend's concerned face level with her own as she lay in the top bunk. Hoping the marks of her tears weren't showing, she smiled bravely. "I was tired. I thought I'd have a lie down. How did the rest of the session go? What was your day like?"

Dave rested his elbows on her bed. "It was okay. A bit boring, really. No one made much headway. The Groups around here are much too vicious. They won't listen to reason. Are you okay? I was

worried about you after you left the room without giving your feedback.”

Carrie sat up on her elbows. “Yes, I’m all right. It was just listening to Belinda going on like that, and everyone hearing how I messed up, I couldn’t stand it. What happened to those poor Singles was all my fault.”

Dave’s eyebrows lifted. “All your fault? I don’t think anyone thought that. We all had a hard time today. Even with both of you there, you probably couldn’t have stopped what happened.”

“I could have tried at least.” Tears pricked her eyes again. “I don’t know. Maybe if it hadn’t been Belinda of all people, telling everyone what I’d done.”

“Hmm, yeah, she didn’t pull any punches, did she? But you showed her up when you were on your very first job. Put her to shame. If she had taken over from you, like Gavin planned, no one would have found out what the placktoids were doing. She needs to get her revenge to feel better about herself.”

Carrie frowned. She hadn’t thought of it like that, but maybe Dave had a point.

“Are you getting up?” he asked. “It’s nearly time for dinner.”

“No, I’m going to give it a miss. I’m not feeling up to facing them all yet, and I really am tired. It’s been a long week.”

“Well, if you’re sure. I heard the chef’s pulling out all the stops tonight. It’s bound to taste fantastic.”

Laughing, Carrie said, “He can’t top the mouldy carrots and sludge flavour of last night’s dinner.”

Her friend nodded. “You’re right. And to think I’ve been missing out on sludge-flavoured food all these years.” The doorbell sounded, and Carrie and Dave looked at each other quizzically. Had Gavin come back for another visit, his dreadful children in tow?

“You open it,” said Dave. He went into the shower room.

Carrie jumped down from the bunk and opened the door. She took a step back. It was Belinda. The gorgeous, statuesque, tawny-haired woman stood in the corridor with her hands on her hips and her lips pressed together in a slight grimace. “Aren’t you going to invite me in, then?”

Stepping aside, Carrie mind whirled as to why the half-dandrobian was there. Had she come to gloat some more? Dave appeared. “Hi, Belinda.”

“Hello. It’s Dave, if I remember rightly?” He nodded. “Do you mind if I sit down?”

“Sure,” said Dave, “but there’s only...” He indicated the lower bunk. Belinda lowered her well-shaped bottom to the bed. An awkward pause stretched out, during which Carrie and Dave

exchanged glances.

"I'm sorry," said Belinda, flushing and looking down. "I'm not used to doing this."

"Look," said Carrie, heatedly, "if you want an apology or something..." Dave placed a hand on her arm.

"No, that isn't it." Belinda looked up into Carrie's eyes. "In fact..." she let out a heavy breath, "in fact...I'm the one who should apologise."

"You should...what?" Carrie's eyes grew wide.

Belinda sighed again, and her shoulders lifted and fell. "I've been a bit of an arse, haven't I?" Carrie was about to answer, then realised the question was rhetorical. "I think I need to explain some things," Belinda continued. "You see, I used to be one of the top Liaison Officers. That's why Gavin called me in to take over from you on Oootoon. After five years' service, my record was spotless. I suppose I'd become too confident, and complacent. I thought I was the bee's knees, to be honest." She paused, and broke eye contact with Carrie. "Frankly, you made me look like a fool." She gave a little shake of her head. "But, well, I deserved it. You were right and I was wrong. Though that was very hard for me to accept at the time. In fact, I didn't accept it. And from then until now, I've been telling myself that it was all just a fluke.

"After what happened today, I thought, that confirms it. I couldn't wait to get back here and tell everyone what an idiot you were. And I did..." she smiled wryly, "...with great relish, enjoying every word. But I expected you to try to defend yourself. *Go on, bluster yourself out of that*, I thought to myself. I was surprised when you didn't. You knew you'd messed up, and you didn't try to justify it. You just walked out. And instead of feeling vindicated, I just felt sort of hollow.

"You see, when I was in your position, I couldn't admit it to myself. But you did. You were better than me, again. So..." She stood and held out her hand. "Let's put an end to this silly feud between us, and let bygones be bygones, okay?"

Her mouth slightly agape, Carrie took the offered hand, and the two women shook. Without another word, Belinda left.

"Did that just happen?" Carrie asked as the door closed.

"Either that or we're both in the same dream."

Carrie sat down with a bump. "And that was Belinda, right?"

"It certainly looked like Belinda, but the words didn't seem to match the personality."

Carrie laughed, then stopped. "Oh, I get it."

"What?"

"We're forgetting she's half-dandrobian."

"You mean you think she's up to something?"

“Exactly. I wonder what it is?”

Dave shrugged. “Who knows? I’m going to dinner. It’ll be over soon. Maybe I’ll talk to Belinda and try to find out what her game is. If there’s anything edible I’ll bring you some back.”

“Thanks.”

After her friend left, Carrie went to take a shower. She marvelled at how clean Dave kept it, apparently effortlessly. She wondered if she should invite him to move in. He obviously loved cleaning, and she hated it, so they were the perfect match. He could bring his boyfriends over whenever he liked, she wouldn’t mind. As she turned the shower off, she heard an announcement being broadcast. She wrapped a towel around herself and went out into the cabin to hear it better. It was Errruorerrrrrhch speaking.

“I repeat. A weapon is missing from the target practice room. It is presumed stolen. Remain exactly where you are while the ship is searched. Anyone moving from their current location will be immediately detained.”

## Chapter Seventeen – The Great Escape

CARRIE'S KNEES TURNED to water. It must be the weapon Dave had taken. The weapon that was under his bed that very minute. She lifted the mattress. There it was. He still hadn't put it somewhere else like she'd told him to. She let out a gasp of frustration as she tried to figure out what to do. Spinning on her heel, she scanned the cabin. Was there somewhere she could hide it? The weapon was very small. Surely there must be somewhere they wouldn't think of looking?

But there didn't seem to be anywhere that wasn't an obvious hiding place. The beds, bags and lockers would be searched immediately. She felt behind the mirror-communication screen, but there were no gaps. It was fixed firmly to the wall. The shower room? Stepping inside, she searched the room with her eyes. Maybe she could put the weapon down the drain, or flush it down the toilet? She dropped it into the bowl, but it lay stubbornly at the bottom after flushing, and the drain in the shower was not removable. Everything else, the walls, ceiling and floor, were one piece of smooth ceramic.

Carrie's heart raced. How long did she have before they came to search? And what was Dave doing, stuck in the canteen? What was he thinking? She hoped he hadn't confessed already, imagining the game was up. He didn't deserve to be punished for taking the weapon. They wouldn't understand he didn't intend any harm; that he would have returned it if he'd had the chance. She wrung her hands. She had to save her friend, she just had to.

Then the answer came. She slowly sat down on Dave's bunk. Of course. If they came to the cabin and found her with the weapon, they would assume she'd taken it. And she wouldn't correct them. She was going to fail the training anyway, so she might as well do something good and save Dave's skin. He was a better Officer than her. The brain scan had said so, and everything she'd done that week had proved it.

Now that she'd made the decision, she felt oddly calm, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. All week she'd been stressing about passing the training. Now it was all over and out of her hands, she didn't have anything to worry about any more. Or did she? She gripped the weapon. She was assuming she would just be kicked off the course, but maybe there was a worse punishment in store for her. What happened to thieves under transgalactic law? Would she go to prison? Carrie swallowed. She remained determined to take the blame for the theft, but she wondered if there was some way to soften the blow about to fall, or someone who could help her? Someone who might help a friend?

A slow smile formed on her face. She would have disobey the



order to stay where she was, but now that she was going to take the rap anyway, what did she have to lose?

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CARRIE STEELED HERSELF as the cabin door opened. She peeped inside, but, apart from one occupant, the room was empty.

“Carrie, what are you doing here?” asked Gavin. “You must return to your room at once. We cannot move about the ship. There has been a...ah. I see.”

Carrie’s palm was open, and in it rested the small green weapon. She stepped into the room and looked around. “Where are your children?”

“They are moulting at the moment. Carrie—”

“Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where are they moulting?” She wondered if a hundred larger versions of Gavin’s offspring were about to pile out of the shower room. Except he didn’t seem to have a shower room. Or a bed. All there was in the room apart from Gavin and a communication screen was a large hole in the floor.

“My children are in a room in a secluded area of the ship where they will not be disturbed. Carrie, I am most disappointed in you. I would never have believed you capable of stealing.”

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know, Gavin. And one of those things is that I’m a thief. An out and out criminal. Yes, I took this. I stole it.”

“I—I do not know what to say. I am not sure why you have come to me to confess your guilt. It would perhaps have been better to wait in your cabin and not disobey the command.”

“The thing is, Gavin, I think we can agree everything’s over for me now. I’m going to wait here quietly until the search reaches this part of the ship. But I wanted to ask you what’s going to happen, and is there anything I can say or do that might mean they’ll deal less harshly with me?”

Her insectoid manager chittered. He crawled to and fro. He wiggled his antennae. His one hundred eyes blinked. “No, there is nothing at all. What is the English expression? You have come to the end of the road, I am afraid.”

Voices, shouting, came from the corridor. It sounded like one of the Council’s managers. “Stop, stop immediately. Return to your room at once.”

Gavin went to the door and opened it. Beyond his bronze head,

Carrie saw several of his children, larger now, scamper past. "Oh, the little rascals, they've escaped," Gavin exclaimed. A small insectoid alien ran into the room, and scuttled around its edges and out again. Its father made a swipe at it as it passed, but he missed. "This is most unfortunate. What am I to do? There will be absolute chaos." A Manager came running down the corridor, closely followed by the chef.

"Will you please control your children," shouted the manager.

"They are just a little high-spirited," called Gavin. "They will calm down soon enough. Please be gentle. They do not mean any harm." He turned to Carrie. "I must leave you. I must gather my children and discuss with them the inadvisability of running recklessly around the ship. Please wait here. I am sure the search will be resumed when my little ones are returned to their room." As he was leaving, he paused halfway through the door. "Not you as well. This is most irregular. Humans will never cease to amaze me. You should not be moving around the ship." He was talking to someone in the corridor, but Carrie couldn't see who it was. Then the person stuck his head around the door.

"I thought I might find you here," said Dave. "All hell's broken loose. Gavin's kids are all over the place. Everyone's left the canteen to try and catch them. Have you got it?"

Carrie nodded and opened her hand to show Dave the weapon. He grimaced.

"So you were aware she had stolen the weapon?" asked Gavin.

"This crime is compounded. Dave, you are an accessory, I am sorry to say. Oh dear, this day is indeed going from bad to worse."

Dave raised his eyebrows. "She...? But I'm the one who—"

"Gavin, weren't you going to look for your children?" asked Carrie.

"Look, there goes another one," she added, as a miniature Gavin darted past.

"Yes, you are correct. I must...but neither of you may leave this room, do you understand?" Two more of the manager's offspring scurried down the corridor.

"Yes," said Carrie, "we understand completely. But if by some strange chance we were to leave, in the confusion I mean, and put the weapon somewhere that was safe, but where it would be found, then...?"

The insectoid alien turned and re-entered the room, his antennae wagging wildly. "No, no, no. That would not be acceptable. I could never condone such behaviour. What you have done is utterly deplorable. I am sure you intended no harm, but stealing a weapon, especially one of such vital importance in the effort to control the placktoids, a top secret—"

“What weapon?” said Dave.

“The weapon Carrie stole, of course,” said Gavin.

She held it out on the flat of her palm. “I can’t see anything, can you, Dave?”

“Nope, nothing at all.”

“Oh, really,” exclaimed Gavin. “I know what you two are doing. It is no use...I—I must call someone to...” Another of his children appeared, climbing the corridor wall. “I must...I must go and find my children. Please remain here. This matter is not resolved.”

As he left, Carrie high-fived her friend.

“Do you think he’ll tell someone?” asked Dave.

Carrie smiled. “I think he’ll probably *forget* in all the confusion.” Lights began to flash, and an announcement sounded.

“Emergency. Emergency. All managers and senior staff report immediately to the central office.”

## Chapter Eighteen – Home Truths

THE MISSING WEAPON did indeed seem to be temporarily forgotten in the new crisis. The senior Council management held a private conference in their staff office, staying mum about what the emergency was, while Carrie and Dave, along with the other trainees, were given the task of catching Gavin and Erruorerrrrrhch's escaped children. The insectoid kids had quickly figured out the pheromone keys to every door on the ship, and they had spread everywhere. When the trainees found them, they were supposed to return them to their room, where they were to be kept locked in and guarded.

Carrie and Dave had been assigned to search the ship's engine room. Carrie was disappointed by the place. She had expected massive dilithium crystals and intense engineers with regional accents, but in fact the room contained only a large number of pipes, running at various angles across the walls and ceiling. "It's a bit underwhelming, isn't it? How do you think the engine works?" she asked Dave.

"If we knew that, humans wouldn't be stuck on Earth, would they?"

"Hmpf." Carrie put her hands on her hips as she surveyed the room. The pipes created nooks and crannies just big enough to hold a naughty immature insectoid alien, but they were very difficult for a human to see between and behind. They would have to feel around each pipe and in each crevice. The special dexterity and sensitivity of human hands was the reason the Managers had given for their selection for the job, but Carrie suspected Gavin had recommended them as a punishment for the weapon-stealing affair.

Dave peered into a shadowed corner. "I'll help find them, but I'm not touching the little monsters."

"Oh come on, they're kind of cute, don't you think?"

"You don't actually mean that, do you."

"No, you're right. I don't." Carrie squatted down and peered under a large white pipe that hummed. When she saw nothing underneath the pipe, she reached behind it, running her hand along the farther side. She tried to push aside thoughts of what the little escapees felt like. Hard, articulated and wriggly, she remembered from the encounter in the canteen. Did they bite? She shuddered, and noticed Dave had returned to the middle of the room and was looking about uncertainly. She straightened up. "I'll tell you what, I'll search this side. You search over there." She pointed. "Then we'll meet in the middle."

He sloped off to the opposite end of the room and began casually inspecting it. Carrie sighed and resumed her search.

“I forgot to ask what you were doing back there, in Gavin’s room,” said Dave.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter now. Forget about it. Damn.” One of Gavin’s children had shot out from a high corner. It dashed across the ceiling before disappearing into a dark recess. “Well we know there’s at least one in here. I wonder if I can climb up there?”

“When I heard the announcement in the canteen, about the weapon,” said Dave, “I panicked. I didn’t know what to do. And of course, I couldn’t do anything anyway. I couldn’t leave, and I couldn’t contact you.”

“They were bound to find out eventually.” Carrie stepped onto a pipe and grabbed the one above. “They must have taken stock of the equipment and noticed they were one weapon short.”

“Yeah, you were right. I should’ve gotten rid of it a long time ago.”

“You shouldn’t have taken it in the first place, but never mind. What’s done is done. It’s over now. That was a good idea of yours to put it in Errruorerrrrrhch’s office after we left Gavin’s room. As soon as the Managers are out of their meeting she’ll find it, and no one will be any the wiser as to who put it there.”

“Yes, that’s a weight off my mind. But you still didn’t answer my question. Why did you go to see Gavin? What were you telling him? From what he said, he seemed to think *you’d* taken it, and you’d gone there to confess.”

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter now.” Carrie stepped up onto another pipe and felt behind it.

“Is that what happened? Is that why you were there?”

Carrie didn’t answer, unsure what to say. She continued to climb the pipes. A juvenile insectoid alien ran out from behind a pipe and over her hand. She gave a squeal and jumped down. The immature insect, going too fast, slipped off the pipe and fell to the floor next to Carrie. She threw herself over it. “I think I’ve got it. Chuck me the bag.”

Dave tossed her the bag they’d been given for transporting the escapees. She caught it in one hand and felt beneath her with the other. “Got you,” she exclaimed, and withdrew a struggling alien. After pushing it into the bag while it protested with a noxious stench, she pulled the tie closed and threw it back to Dave. “You hold onto this while I search the rest of the room.”

Her friend caught the bag and quickly put it down. “Carrie, answer me, did you go to Gavin to tell him you were the thief? To take the rap for me?”

Exhaling heavily she answered, “Kind of, but it made sense, you know? I’m going to fail the course. Gavin as much as told me so, but you’ll make a great Liaison Officer. I thought I might as well take the

blame so the Council doesn't miss out on having you."

"What?" Dave took a step towards her. "That's insane. I mean, I appreciate it. That was an amazing thing for you to do. You're a great friend. But, you're good at your job. You aren't going to fail. Whereas me, well, I have no idea what I'm doing. I can barely swim even."

"Huh, there's a lot more than swimming involved. You've done really well, especially considering you only came along to do me a favour." She began climbing again, heading for the recess where the first insect they had seen was hiding. "I try. I want to help, I really do, but I can't seem to do anything right. Things just go to pot whenever I appear on the scene, and I don't know why. I've given up trying to figure it out."

"Well, firstly that isn't true. You've done great work—"

"No, I've just been lucky, as Belinda pointed out."

"—and secondly, if you just thought things through a bit more..."

"What do you mean, if I thought things through more? I think things through all the time. I don't know what you're talking about." She reached into the hole. "Hmm...it isn't there. It must have moved while we weren't looking." She began climbing down.

"I mean it, Carrie. Every time you do something stupid, I swear, it's just because you're being reckless and impulsive. If you just thought before you acted, you wouldn't have half the problems you do."

Carrie's mouth opened to an O as she reached the ground.

"Reckless and impulsive, am I?" she exclaimed. "Thanks very much. After I take the blame for your kleptomania, this is the gratitude I get. Insults from someone who's supposed to be my friend." She snatched the bag out of Dave's hand.

"Carrie, I'm just trying to help."

"Well, I can do without your *help*." She turned her back on him. "I've had enough of this searching. We're going to be here all day at this rate." She squared her shoulders and addressed the room. "Okay, I can see you all. I know exactly where you are, so you might as well come out now." After a moment, three insectoid children crawled from their hiding places, somehow looking abashed. Carrie put the bag on the floor and opened its mouth. "Game's over. In you get."

Dave looked on, shaking his head in awe, as Gavin's offspring trooped obediently into the bag. "You see—"

"Hmpf. Got some more insults to throw at me?" asked Carrie, pulling the ties closed and throwing the bag over her shoulder, while an odious smell emanated from the protesting aliens inside.

Carrie marched from the engine room into the corridor, where she bumped into and rebounded from Audrey. Ignoring Dave, Carrie accompanied the green blob trainee as she rolled to return her

captured children to confinement.

Audrey related how she had saved one of them from a nasty death by checking inside an oven as the chef was about to turn it on. “Have you heard the rumour?” she continued.

“I haven’t heard anything,” replied Carrie. “I’ve been stuck in the engine room taking gibes from my best friend.” She threw a derisive glance over her shoulder.

“Oh...er...”

“Never mind. What’s the news? Do you know what the emergency is?”

“Yes,” exclaimed Audrey. “Everyone’s saying they detected a transgalactic gateway opening on the other side of the planet. *This* planet. And they think it’s the placktoids.”

## Chapter Nineteen – The Final Straw

“AS YOU ARE AWARE, WE are in a state of emergency. I will explain the nature of that emergency and our intended actions going forward.” Errruorerrrrrhch addressed the trainees, who had been gathered in the canteen.

“I believe you may already know that placktoids have appeared on this planet, approximately four hundred and twenty-two clicks southeast from here. Yes, they came through a transgalactic gateway. Why they chose this planet to reappear is as yet unknown. There have been no other gateways detected, nor sightings of placktoids elsewhere in the galaxy. From the numbers currently present on the planet, we can surmise the majority of them remain hidden elsewhere.”

Carrie rested her chin in her hand, wishing Errruorerrrrrhch would get to the point. What were they going to *do*?

“According to long-range surveillance, the placktoids are on an ocean bed that is relatively close to the surface. They are constructing buildings, and a gigantic net of some kind, which floats above their settlement. We have as yet, to be frank, no idea what they are planning.”

Carrie raised her hand.

“We have informed the central Council and the Unity of the little intelligence we have. We currently await their response. Some of you may know already that, while troops and weapons up to a certain size can travel by gateway, starships cannot. They must use FTL propulsion, and so—”

Carrie raised her hand higher, lifting slightly out of her seat.

“—And so,” continued Errruorerrrrrhch, louder, “until Unity battleships arrive, for protection from the placktoids we have only the gunship that was supplied to subdue aggression among the marsoliie. The military capacity of the gunship is insufficient to justify a preemptive attack on the placktoids. Of course, we can assume they know we are here—”

Carrie stood and waved.

“Sit down,” Dave said.

“I just want to ask a question,” Carrie hissed.

“—yet they do not, for the moment, seem intent upon approaching.” Errruorerrrrrhch swivelled to face Carrie. “YES?” The whole room jumped.

“Could you explain what we’re going to do?”

“AS I was about to say, we are not going to DO anything for the moment.”



Carrie slumped down in her seat.

“The placktoids seem to be able to open a gateway wherever they choose across the entire galaxy. Therefore, there is no purpose in leaving. If we were to leave this very moment, they could open a gateway right where I am standing and there would be nothing we could do about it. At least while we are here, the Council has representatives on hand to keep watch on their activities while larger forces make their way to the location.

“As to whether we will open a dialogue with the placktoids, that has yet to be decided. We await further instructions on the matter. In the meantime, we will not be returning you to your home planets. Gateway travel is once more prohibited to allow the Council to track unauthorised usage. Your training will continue as normal, with the exception that no long distance journeys will be allowed. If the marsoliie request mediation services, they must approach within one click of the ship.

“That is all. You are dismissed.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “That’s it?” She turned to Dave. “We’re just going to sit here and do nothing?”

“Sounds like it.”

Pushing back her chair so that the legs screeched along the ground, Carrie stood up. “Unbelievable. What about the marsoliie and all the other creatures? Aren’t they going to do anything to protect them? This is just like what happened with the squashpumps. They just don’t care.”

Dave also stood. “Honestly, Carrie.”

“Honestly what?” She followed him as he left the canteen.

He was two strides ahead of her. “Never mind.”

“No, tell me.”

Dave lengthened his stride, and Carrie had to increase her speed to keep up.

“What’s the point?” asked Dave. “I’ll only get accused of insulting you.”

“Oh, I get it. I’m being *impulsive* and *reckless* just because I happen to care what happens to innocent civilians? Because I think they should be protected from evil aliens like the placktoids? Nobody’s been as close to them as I have. Nobody else understands what the placktoids are like, what they’re capable of.”

They had reached their cabin. As they entered and the door closed behind them, Dave turned to face Carrie, his face rigid. “Nobody understands them like you? Have you considered who you’re talking to? I was there too, remember?” He jabbed a finger at his chest. “I went through it all right beside you. I was nearly killed by the placktoid commander.” He bent down, picked a towel off the floor and

went into the shower room.

“Then you should know exactly what I’m talking about. We need to do something, and now.”

Returning, Dave picked up Carrie’s pyjamas and other discarded clothes before putting them on her bed. “No, we don’t.”

“Yes, we DO, before it’s too late.”

Dave grabbed his hair in both hands and let go. “This is exactly what I’m talking about, Carrie. You think you have a monopoly on compassion? Errruorrerrrrhch explained very clearly why we have to wait. But you didn’t listen. You just want to run off and do something, anything. Whatever hare-brained plan comes into your head. You never think about the consequences of your actions.

“And look at this.” He spread his arm wide, indicating the messy cabin, with Council devices and bits of rubbish scattered around. “More evidence of your thoughtless, inconsiderate attitude. All week I’ve been cleaning up after you. All week. I’ve had enough.” He opened his locker and pulled out his bag. As he was filling it with his things, he continued, “I knew if I said anything to you...if I tried to make you understand what you were doing wrong, you wouldn’t listen. You’d get offended. And I was right. You go on about Belinda being rude and pigheaded? Well, maybe the next time you feel like moaning about her, go have a look in there first.” He pointed at the mirror before stuffing the last of his possessions into his bag.

Carrie stood dumbfounded through this speech. As Dave opened the door she managed to ask, “But, where will you go?”

“I don’t know. But wherever it is, it’ll be better than living with you.”

Carrie watched the closed door for a long moment.

When it was clear her friend wouldn’t be coming back, she took down the T-shirt he had draped over the cabin window to block out the view of the ocean. She carefully folded it and placed it on the locker top. She would have to remember to give it to him the next time she saw him, whenever that might be. Going to the window, she gazed deep into the murky water. Far off, lights blinked in brilliant, intricate patterns. It must have been the creatures she had seen on her way to the most recent marsoliie meeting, where she had been tardy, and the Groups had taken all the Singles. She recalled stopping to watch beautiful lights, making herself late, then delaying further because she had been too proud to tell anyone about her confusion and too stupid to figure out what the problem was.

The green ocean light dimmed as a dark mass floated nearer overhead. It was the creature Carrie had spoken to, who had told her it would soon deal with any placktoids that arrived. She wondered if it knew that the mechanical aliens had indeed appeared, and if it had

any plans for dealing with them. As her eyes grew used to the darkness of the water, she could make out a patch of red, which moved and pulsated. Group marsoliie, it had to be, probably patrolling, looking for Singles to annex. She ached to get out there and do something to protect them.

She frowned. Was this what Dave was talking about? Was she really reckless and impulsive? She had never seen him so angry. But it felt so wrong not to act. To just sit by and wait. It made her feel useless. Abruptly, she turned from the window and sat on the locker top. On the floor around her lay the stuff Dave had complained about. It did look a bit messy, she had to admit.

The room seemed very quiet and empty without her friend there. She wondered where he had gone. Maybe another trainee had room in a cabin. The squashpump didn't take up much space, though she imagined its room was rather damp. A sob rose in her throat, but she fought it down. She refused to cry, though whether it was out of defiance or because she didn't want to pity herself for her own mistakes, she wasn't sure.

## Chapter Twenty – Dance Up a Storm

SITTING WITH AUDREY and the ootoon at breakfast the following day, Carrie smiled too brightly and laughed and talked too loudly. She kept glancing about, as if looking for someone, and hardly touched her breakfast. When her eyes chanced upon Dave entering the canteen, she looked quickly away before he could see her watching him. After she had allowed sufficient time for him to get his breakfast, she looked in his direction again. He wasn't heading to her table, of course, but when she saw who he was sitting with, her spine stiffened. Belinda.

Was he sharing a cabin with her now? It made sense. The cabins for humans were large enough for two, and Belinda was a latecomer to the training course, so she would have been allocated a room all to herself. Too late, Carrie realised the half-dandrobian had seen her watching. She jerked her head away. Had Belinda smirked at her? She wasn't sure, but her cheeks burned.

She stirred the substance in her bowl, which might have been porridge if it hadn't tasted the same as the smell of a wet dog. She had eaten nothing for dinner and she should have been hungry, but she wasn't. Even her persistent pot belly was showing signs of defeat.

*Is something wrong? Who are you talking to? Carrie. Carrie? Who's that? I think she's looking peaky, wouldn't you say? Maybe the food doesn't agree with her. Is it the food? You can ask for something else, you know dear. Whatever it is, I hope it isn't catching. Oh don't be silly, we couldn't catch a disease from a human. Is there a medic on board? You should go and—*

"I'm fine," said Carrie, pushing her chair back to stand. It screeched so loudly the whole canteen stopped talking and turned to see where the noise was coming from. "I'm just not very hungry. Do you know what we're doing today?"

"Individual exercises," said Audrey. "You can choose from the list, according to what you need most practice in. Transgalactic law, the art of diplomacy and some other things. I can't remember exactly."

The green blob's words brought Carrie some relief. At least she wouldn't have to face Dave and his new half-dandrobian friend in a group class. She said goodbye and left the table, but as she approached the door, Errruorerrrrrhch appeared, forcing her to step back. "Wait a moment, please," said the Manager as she passed.

The insectoid alien rapped a table with a claw for attention. When the room had quietened, she said, "In this difficult, dangerous time, I am pleased to report some good news. Outside of Council mediation, the marsoliie have reached a new level of understanding. The Groups

have agreed a moratorium on their activities, for the duration of the crisis at least. As is customary within this species, the Groups and Singles must perform a ritual dance, and we are all invited.

“Due to the current threat from the placktoids, the dance will take place directly outside the ship. The morning’s activities will be postponed in view of this unusual opportunity for you, as trainees, to observe a culture in concord, as opposed to conflict. It is important that you understand the value of your roles within the Council, and how rewarding successful mediation is.”

When Errruorerrrrrhch’s speech was over, Carrie continued to her room. She was happy for the marsoliie, but the news didn’t lighten her mood. She wasn’t cut out to be a Liaison Officer. She was going to fail the course, and the Group and Single dance would be her final sight of the species. The thought made her sad. Their movements were beautiful and mesmerising.

To kill time, she cleaned the shower room and put away her things neatly. When the cabin was clean and tidy, and she had nothing else to occupy her, she watched the ocean outside her window, where the marsoliie were gathering.

Finally, the announcement came that they were to gather at the airlocks. Carrie quickly put on her swimsuit and wetsuit and grabbed her Officer toolbox, checking she had respirator tablets and the rest of her equipment. In the corridor, she saw Dave. He tried to catch her eye, but she looked away. The memory of his words still echoed in her mind.

When she was outside the ship, the cool ocean water soon warmed against her skin. Swimming relaxed her a little, as it always did. The sight of the swelling ranks of marsoliie also lightened her heart. Their pulsating passage was graceful, complex and delicate as they travelled the currents.

Audrey arrived and bumped her. “Can you see it?”

She looked around. What did Audrey mean? All she could see was the creamy ceramic Council ship, the staff and trainees and the marsoliie. “What?”

“Over there.”

This phrase seemed redundant to Carrie. Audrey was pretty much a sphere, with no appendages to point with, but she bobbed in one direction and back again. Carrie looked the way she indicated, but she could see nothing but ocean. Unless? She squinted and looked again. A patch of water didn’t seem to quite match its surroundings, as if something were there that looked almost, but not quite, the same as the rest of the ocean. “The Unity gunship?” It was camouflaged in the same way as the military uniforms.

Audrey bobbed up and down in affirmation. “And the soldiers have

come out to watch the display, too, I think. It's hard to tell, but there might be some just there." As she spoke, a soldier drifted in front of the Council ship and became briefly visible.

An idea sparked in Carrie's mind. Maybe she could do as Belinda had done, and become a soldier? But no, she couldn't risk it. If Dave was right about her faults, she definitely wasn't soldier material.

The marsoliie Groups and Singles were gathered into one large crowd, and no more seemed to be arriving. The Council airlocks opened, and the managers came out, each insectoid alien encased in an individual bubble of air. Audience and performers were ready. The Dance began.

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CARRIE KNEW SHE WOULD never forget that performance. Without any apparent signal, the marsoliie lifted as one in a glorious scarlet fountain that then split apart like a stupendous firework, spraying across the ocean. Each segment the movement created turned in on itself before opening out in sequence, creating unique, oscillating crimson snowflakes, which flowed and coalesced again into one. As the Dance continued, Carrie began to feel dizzy. She realised she had stopped breathing. She inhaled, and gasped as the marsoliie began another movement, faster and more complex than anything she had seen up to that point. And just when Carrie thought the Dance could not become more stunningly beautiful, the marsoliie wreathed themselves in threads of silver that shimmered in the ocean shadows, catching the rippling beams from above.

Carrie couldn't remember when or why she began to move. It was an effect of watching the marsoliie performance for sure. One moment she was motionless, transfixed, floating in the water, and the next she was dancing, her limbs clumsily mimicking the exquisite motion of the aliens she was watching. She was transported to another world, where she was one with the marsoliie. A Group or a Single, it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was participating in the magnificent Dance.

Something bumped her. It was Audrey. "What are you doing? Everyone's watching you."

Broken from her trance, Carrie finally saw the Council staff and trainees were no longer regarding the marsoliie, but had turned towards her. She quickly drew in her limbs and cringed. With a heart of lead, she heard Dave's words again. She was being impulsive. She had been carried away in the moment, not thinking about what she was doing.

A manager came swimming over, his ten pairs of legs working the water. "Please be more careful, Carrie." It was Gavin. "You must remember that what to humans is mere personal physical expression, carries meaning to the marsoliie. They are perhaps concentrating too much on their own dance to observe yours at the moment, but you could have accidentally communicated something that would cause great offence."

Carrie swallowed. "Yes, you're right, I'm sorry."

Another voice crackled in Carrie radio. It was unfamiliar, but authoritative, loud and urgent. "Get back. Placktoids approaching rapidly. Council staff, back to your ship." It was the Unity captain.

Through a break in the disintegrating marsoliie ranks, Carrie glimpsed the metallic forms of the placktoids closing in. Beams shot out in the darkness. The Unity troops were firing the new weapons, but the placktoids were hidden behind the fleeing marsoliie. The troops fired only intermittently as the mechanical aliens drew closer.

The Council ship airlocks were open, and the managers and trainees swam hastily towards them. Before any of them arrived at the ship, something dark shot out, and like a massive, black, many-fingered fist, and the Council staff shuddered. The dark object was a net. It exploded into the marsoliie, enclosing hundreds. As quickly as it had appeared, the net closed. The struggling marsoliie fought and surged within as they were forced closer and closer together. Tightening into a ball of scarlet crossed with black lines, the captured marsoliie were being drawn away into the murky depths.

## Chapter Twenty-One – Placktoid Proposal

THE UNITY GUNSHIP HAD clearly been anticipating an attack. Those few soldiers Audrey and Carrie had spotted were just a ruse to encourage the placktoids to think they were being complacent or they were unaware of the mechanical aliens' presence. From behind the gunship, quickly blending with the ocean around them, Unity fighter ships rose, firing as they came.

Carrie's mouth fell open as the laser beams shot through the water. She had never seen a battle before. All her life she'd watched and enjoyed sci-fi TV shows and films, but what was happening in front of her was real. Too real.

"Into the ship, into the ship," called Errruorerrrrrhch.

Swimming away from the fighting, Carrie couldn't resist looking over her shoulder as she followed the other trainees to the airlocks. The marsoliie that hadn't been caught in the net were scattering. Panicked, their movements were uncoordinated and clumsy. They couldn't move out of the way quickly enough, and as the placktoids returned fire, several were caught in their rays and burst into ragged scarlet explosions, a cruel mockery of their earlier Dance.

Carrie wailed at the sight of the destroyed marsoliie. The Unity fighters zoomed up and around, in and out of the marsoliie, seemingly trying to avoid hitting the innocent civilians. Meanwhile the massive net of trapped Groups and Singles, hopelessly entangled in the thick black wires, withdrew into the distance.

The soldiers must have already returned to the Unity ship for it rose through the water, its fighter ships following it. As the vessels breached the surface, the cascade of current and bubbles knocked Carrie away from the airlocks. They were all open, but she didn't know for how long. The Council staff were crowding in. When they were full they would have to close them to allow the occupants to enter the ship. She kicked her fins powerfully against the downward drag, propelling herself closer.

The nearest airlock was closing. She would never make it before it shut, so she swam as quickly as she could to the next, scooting under its closing door just in time. The wait inside the lock, as the water drained out and air entered, was agonising. As soon as the inner door opened wide enough for her to pass through she was under it and out into the corridor, pulling off her helmet and stripping her wetsuit as she went.

Pushing back her wet hair from her face, she ran to the nearest porthole. The ocean was still filled with scattering marsoliie. Through and beyond them, the placktoids fled, the huge net of marsoliie



bobbing above their heads. In the distance, the ocean parted as Unity ships plunged in from above. Unable to fire directly down without hitting the captured marsoliie, they aimed at the placktoids laterally.

The scene became smaller, and Carrie realised the Council ship had started up and was withdrawing from the battle site. She pushed her face against the porthole, straining to see what was happening. There was a flash of light from the placktoids, followed by a massive boom. She gasped as the light hit the solid form of the Unity gunship and poured over it, enveloping it.

Then the shock wave came. The remaining marsoliie were hit first. Shattered to confetti they flew apart. Carrie grasped her mouth as a sob rose in her throat. The wave hit the ship, and she was thrown from her feet. Her head hit the wall opposite. She was spreadeagled across it as the wave lifted the ship and turned it on its side.

Trainees, Managers and other staff throughout the corridor sprawled and staggered. As the ship tipped further, Carrie wondered whether the shock wave would turn it right over. But gradually the ship righted itself and she found her feet again. As soon as she was upright, she ran back to the porthole. The battle scene was farther distant. The marsoliie were red dots. The placktoids were glints. The Unity ships were not to be seen. Carrie hoped with all her heart that they hadn't suffered serious damage. Errruorerrrrrhch had said the gunship didn't have the firepower to defeat the placktoids, and she had been right.

"Are you okay?"

Carrie turned to see Dave's anxious face. "Yes, I'm fine. And you?"

"Yes, not too bad. That was one hell of an experience."

"And Belinda? And everyone else?"

"It looks like everyone made it back safely."

"Thank goodness."

"Yeah."

There was a pause. Carrie had so much to say, but then again there were no words for how she felt. All her anger at Dave, her embarrassment, her hurt, all of it melted away as she realised she could have lost her best friend. "Dave, I'm—"

He held out his arms, and they hugged.

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THE TRAINEES WERE LEFT in limbo with vague orders to tidy up and be on full alert while the senior staff dealt with the crisis. According to the grapevine, they were in frantic communication with the Unity gunship and Council and Unity Central Offices. Carrie was relieved to

learn the gunship had quickly withdrawn once it became clear there was nothing they could do to free the captured marsoliie. Consequently, there were no serious casualties among the Unity soldiers.

When everything had been put to rights and there was nothing left for the trainees to do, they gathered in the canteen, where they speculated about what would happen next. The general consensus was that they should just leave immediately. Carrie was against the idea. She wanted them to do something to help. The Council didn't have the combative abilities of the Unity, but it did possess the skills of mediation and negotiation, which were sometimes more effective than firepower, she argued.

She couldn't erase from her mind the image of the trapped marsoliie. Anxiety ran through her at the thought of them. She was compelled to do something, anything to free them. But she wondered if maybe it was only her impulsiveness talking. She was on remedial training, and she was going to fail even that. Maybe she should leave the action to people who knew better than her, and wait for orders.

"It's horrible, waiting, isn't it?" said Audrey.

"I can't bear it," said Carrie. "I wish they would give us something else to do."

"They'll tell us soon, I think. We'll be going home by gateway any minute, like the way they sent Errruorerrrrrhch and Gavin's kids away as soon as the placktoids were sighted."

"I hope not. I don't want to go home. I want to help."

An announcement echoed in the room. "Trainees, please return to your rooms. We are here for the duration. Please return to your cabins and await further orders."

"Oh no," said Audrey, "I was hoping this was the end of it for us."

The announcement continued, "Carrie Hatchett, go directly to the staff office."

Carrie tensed and looked at Audrey, her eyebrows raised. What had she done? Had Gavin told them about the weapon? It seemed a funny time to be disciplining her, but she supposed they had nothing else to do while they waited for the placktoid crisis to unfold. All eyes, heads and antennae on her, she left the canteen.

Five managers awaited her in the large room. Two of them were Errruorerrrrrhch and Gavin, but she found it difficult to tell the others apart.

"Thank you for coming." Gavin's tone was polite and kindly. "Would you like to sit down?"

She looked around. Carrie smiled as she was reminded of the first time she had met her insectoid manager. "There's nowhere to sit."

"Ah yes. Well, please prepare yourself. I have something important

to tell you, and the information may be something of a shock.”

This was it. They were going to tell her she’d failed the training. They’d picked a helluva time.

“This afternoon’s events are most regrettable. We tried to insist the marsoliie did not perform their ritual dance, but they were not to be put off. As it was, the placktoids took the opportunity to gather a large number all at once, when they had clearly been planning to capture them individually over time—”

“Get to the point,” said a manager.

“Very well, very well. Carrie, we have received a communication from the placktoid commander. He is offering a bargain. It seems they had a particular purpose in coming to Gaginion. In return for the release of the captured marsoliie, the commander is asking for...” Gavin turned to the other Managers. “I really must register my protest once more. She should not be informed. This is far too weighty a matter for a simple Officer—”

“If you don’t tell her, I’ll do it myself,” another manager interrupted.

“Very well.” Gavin’s bronze head returned to Carrie. He blinked. “Carrie, my dear, in return for the release of the captured marsoliie, the placktoids are asking for you.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two – A Friend in Need

CARRIE MISSED DAVE that night more than she had ever missed him before. Despite their reconciliation, he had obviously decided to stay in Belinda's cabin for the rest of their time aboard. The half-dandrobian probably picked up after herself, Carrie mused.

She sighed and turned over. From her new position, she could see through the cabin window to the ocean outside. They were at a latitude where the sun didn't set, and the daylight that shone through the water had dimmed but not entirely disappeared. She was hoping to see the small creatures that flashed in detailed patterns, or some other kind of interesting ocean life, but all was still except for ribbons of dark material that occasionally floated past, and vague shadowy shapes too far distant to make out clearly. If only she'd had the opportunity to explore the planet properly and find out all about the seventeen sentient species that lived there...now it looked as though that would never happen.

They were far from the placktoid base, but the mechanical aliens felt dreadfully near. She'd seen the maw of the shredder placktoid close up before and it was vivid in her mind. She could also clearly hear the cacophonous din of offkey classical music the placktoids created when speaking with other species.

Gavin had outlined the placktoid proposal gently and with many assurances that the Council Managers only wanted to keep her informed in case the placktoids decided to attack, because then she would be in particular danger, though of course the Unity would do everything to protect her. It was simple: the placktoids had identified her as the person who had exposed them. Due to her, a much-respected commander was imprisoned beneath ootoon. Their communication stated only that if the Council handed her over, they would release the marsoliie. What they would do with her, or to her, they didn't explain, though it was safe to conclude it wouldn't be anything she would enjoy.

Why the placktoids didn't simply open a gateway on the ship and storm it, no one understood for sure, but probably they weren't that confident in their firepower just yet, and perhaps they had intelligence about the new weapons that pierced their armour. If Carrie arrived at the placktoid base, unarmed, within twenty-hours, the mechanical aliens would return to wherever it was they were hiding.

There was no question of giving herself up, no question, Gavin had assured her. Carrie didn't think the rest of the managers were in full agreement. It was only one life against many, and the Unity battleships were still days out. Gavin had also explained there was no

easy escape for her. Wherever they sent her, the placktoids would probably find her, just as they had found out she was on Gaginion. If she went home to Earth, she would be exposing her home planet to a placktoid invasion.

As yet, the Unity had no plan for rescuing the marsoliie. Any attack on the base put their lives at risk. Carrie turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling. No matter what Gavin said, the solution seemed obvious. They were just waiting for her to say it. She closed her eyes and wished she hadn't driven Dave away with her bad behaviour and messy habits.

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AUDREY OPENED HER DOOR after only one ring of her doorbell.

"I hope I didn't wake you," said Carrie. She needed someone to talk to, and Audrey was the closest friend she had aboard after Dave and Gavin, both of whom she had annoyed enough already.

"Oh no, we don't sleep. Come in."

"You don't sleep?" She went into the green blob's cabin. "What do you do during rest periods?"

"Just bounce around, mostly."

Judging by the number of round, green imprints on Audrey's walls, she did a lot of bouncing.

"Is something bothering you?" Audrey asked.

"Yes, quite a bit actually. Do you mind if I hang out here for a while?"

"Be my guest," said Audrey as she bounced off the ceiling.

Carrie had been sworn to secrecy by the Managers. She supposed it was because they didn't know how the other trainees might react. Maybe they would gang up on her and tell her to give herself up to save the marsoliie. She hadn't really recovered her reputation after Belinda's damning account at the plenary session. But Carrie had never been good at keeping secrets, and she had got to know Audrey quite well over the week. She thought she could trust her, especially when it came to the question of possibly sacrificing herself to vicious mechanical aliens.

As her story unfolded, Audrey stopped bouncing. She rolled to a rest next to Carrie, where she listened, vibrating gently.

"So, that's it," Carrie concluded. "If I don't give myself over to them, hundreds of marsoliie will die."

"You aren't going to do it, are you?"

Carrie shrugged. "I don't see what else I can do."

"No. You can't. You mustn't. It would be stupid. It would only

encourage the placktoids. We can't let them win at anything." Audrey wobbled in agitation.

"That's what the Managers said. *We must never give in to terrorists.* But isn't negotiation what our job's about? Bargaining? Give and take?"

"Not giving and taking lives," exclaimed Audrey.

Carrie shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe you're right. You're a much better Officer than me." She put her face in her hands. "What am I going to do?"

"I can't believe they even told you. That's a terrible responsibility to put on someone."

"They said it was for my protection. So I would know, if we were attacked, that they were coming for me."

Audrey rolled around the room. "I don't understand. If they want you, why not just come and get you? Why complicate things?"

"The Managers said they think it's because they aren't confident yet. They don't want to risk it. This way, if I give myself up, they won't suffer any casualties. But they know the Unity battleships are on their way, so I have to hand myself over by the deadline or they kill the marsoliie."

Audrey began rolling again. "Maybe there's a middle way. So we can save the marsoliie without losing you."

"I've been thinking about that too. But I've wracked my brains for hours without coming up with anything. If we or the Unity approach the placktoid station with weapons, they'll be able to detect them and they'll hurt the marsoliie. If I go in there with no weapons, that's it for me. But at least the marsoliie go free."

"I wouldn't bet on it. This is the placktoids we're talking about, remember? Once they have you, there's nothing to stop them destroying the marsoliie and disappearing through a transgalactic gateway, back to wherever it is they came from."

"You're right. But what else can we do? This is no good," said Carrie, standing up. "There isn't any answer. I should get back to my cabin. Maybe I'll get some sleep. Thanks for listening." What she actually intended was different from what she told Audrey. She intended to go straight to the nearest airlock and swim out into the ocean, where the placktoids could pick her up. That way, it would be clear no one had forced her to take the decision, and no one could stop her. At least the marsoliie might have a chance that way.

"Sit down. Don't give up yet. We have some of the best, most diverse trainee Officers right here aboard this ship. Between us, we must be able to find a way."

Carrie hesitated. She sat down. A few more hours one way or another, what difference would it make?



WHEN CARRIE BURST INTO the staff office the following morning, she found Dave arguing loudly with them. At the sight of her, he raised a finger to stop her speaking. His eyes were like steel. "You're not doing it."

How had he found out? Maybe Gavin had told him. "Yes, I am."

"No way. I'll tie you to the ship if I have to. I'll, I'll—"

"No, you don't understand. I've got a plan. Or, actually, we've got a plan. Audrey and I thought it up last night."

"Ahem," said Gavin, "would this happen to be anything like the plan you had on the squashpump planet? Because I would not say that plan was particularly well thought out."

"No, not like the plan on the squashpump planet. We've thought it through carefully, together. Step by step. It might actually work." Seeing Dave's expression, she amended her words. "It will work, I'm sure of it."

"No," said Dave. "I know what you're like. You're just going to go off on one of your hare-brained escapades. But this is serious, Carrie. Your life is at risk. I'm not going to let you do it."

"You're not going to...?" She put her hands on her hips. Her voice rose. "Who do you think you are, telling me what I can and can't..." She caught herself, closed her eyes for a moment, and continued, "I know you're worried about me, Dave. And you have every right to be. I've been stupid, and reckless, and an idiot. But I've learned my lesson. This plan will work. I know it will. We can free the marsoliie, I won't be harmed, and we can get the placktoids back for what they've done."

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Sink or Swim

SOMEWHERE, OUT IN THE dark ocean, somewhere nearby, the Unity ship waited. Or, at least, Carrie hoped it did. She couldn't see it, but then she wouldn't expect to. A ship full of brave soldiers, who would swoop in and rescue her before the placktoids...she gulped.

The mechanical aliens had specified a distance of one click and no closer for the Council and Unity vessels, and that Carrie had to travel without the aid of a water scooter or any other vehicle in which she could hide a weapon. They had also said she could bring nothing with her: no toolbox, no devices, only a translator so that she could hear their court judgement, presumably before they...she swallowed again.

One click was quite a distance, and she had a long swim ahead of her, and only one respirator tablet to last her the whole trip. The placktoids' demands had been explicit: no additional items to be carried on her person, not even the tablets she needed to stay alive. The indicator needle was on the far left, so the tablet was completely fresh. One less thing to worry about, for the time being at least.

Far off, an upside-down, scarlet teardrop swayed like a hot air balloon at a fair. The large net of trapped marsoliie. Below it, very unlike a fair, sat the placktoid base. Carrie recognised the cubic, featureless buildings she had first seen on Oootoon. Lacking all decoration or ornament, they indicated to her, hopefully, the placktoids' lack of imagination.

Gavin had told Carrie once, before they understood how evil the placktoids were, that they deserved the same consideration and respect as every other civilisation in the galaxy. He'd said they had culture and an obscure history, during which their original creators had been lost to knowledge. Just because they were mechanical, that did not mean they weren't sentient nor entitled to the same rights as other intelligent species.

Gazing at the patch of floodlit ground where the placktoids awaited her, Carrie wondered what Gavin thought of them now.

It was difficult for her to swim encased as she was in Audrey's huge wetsuit. She imagined she must look like a blimp, with only the bottom halves of her arms and legs poking out. Her legs began aching with the effort of kicking when she had such little room to move. As she swam steadily on, she hoped the placktoids wouldn't think it strange that she had grown noticeably larger. But as they seemed to have watched plenty of Earth TV she had her fingers crossed that they were familiar with the fact that humans sometimes became excessively overweight.

She glanced over her shoulder. In the Council ship portholes were



faces. Dave, Gavin, Audrey, the blinking light, even Belinda had come to see her off. Though had the half-dandrobian only turned up to make sure she left? Whatever. She was grateful for the emotional support. Most of all, she was happy she had parted from Dave on good terms. If she were not to return, he would have good memories of her.

She shivered and shook her head. She needed to keep a positive outlook. The plan was a good one, with a better than average chance of succeeding. She looked over her shoulder again. The Council ship looked much smaller now. She must have covered about half the distance. She just needed to stay calm, think carefully and follow the plan through step by step. No rash, reckless behaviour.

As she drew nearer to the placktoid base, Carrie took a look around into the ocean depths. Anything to avoid seeing the placktoids until the last minute when she would have to face them. The water was dim. The dark ribbon shapes she had seen the previous night swam past in the distance to her right, and she thought she could detect, farther on, a patch of the sentient mat that floated on the ocean surface, which she had encountered on her first foray into the water. Above, the green light from the alien sun looked friendly and inviting, though she knew the atmosphere meant death. There were no marsoliie to be seen. Carrie didn't blame them for not approaching the area where their friends and relations were being held captive. She hoped the Groups in the net were leaving the Singles alone.

Her breath was labouring. Swimming in the massive wetsuit was much harder than she had imagined. Her respirator indicator needle was approaching the centre. She tried to breathe more shallowly, but she needed all the oxygen she could get to keep going.

There was movement ahead. Glinting in the diffuse light, large placktoid paperclips were patrolling the perimeter of the base. Their hovering motion made Carrie shiver as she recalled how she had first travelled inside one as it took her up to the placktoid ship. She had been so ignorant, so naive at the time, it was a wonder she hadn't got herself and Dave killed. But that was then. This was now. This was a different Carrie, who meant business.

A paperclip was growing larger. It was zooming out to meet her. She stopped swimming. Finally, she was able to rest her aching legs as she waited for it. Her breathing slowed. Thank goodness. She was going to need all the oxygen her respirator tablet contained.

The placktoid didn't speak, at least not to her. It might have been transmitting to its superiors at the base. Instead, it floated in front of her and began to vibrate, disturbing the water surrounding it. The familiar attractive force drew Carrie into its centre where she floated, contained within an invisible forcefield, while the paperclip completed her journey to the placktoid commander. Once there, she would be

given over to it to do with as it pleased, or so it thought.

During the short final leg, she used the time to collect her thoughts and go over each step carefully in her mind. The first step and the most important was to take place outside the base. This was where it would be a disaster if things didn't go according to plan. She had to be released from the forcefield at the entrance to the base. There was no logical reason that prevented the paperclip from carrying her inside and directly through to the commander, but previously, on Oootoon, the paperclips had always dropped her, Dave and Belinda at the entrance to the ship, never carrying them inside.

Carrie hoped that Gavin was right, that the placktoids had culture, habits and ways of behaving that were not purely logical.

They were nearly at the base. The doors opened as the paperclip slowed down. Carrie's heart rose into her mouth. Would it carry her right inside? If the forcefield wasn't deactivated while she was outside the base...She began to sweat. Through the open doors she could see only darkness. The square, empty entrance loomed larger.

At the very last second, just inside the threshold, she was released. She fell to the base floor, pulled down by the weight of the wetsuit and its contents, but the contents cushioned her fall well. That was the least of her concerns. Her back tickled as the trainee squashpump, clad in a scrap of Unity uniform, slid up her back and out the neck of her suit. She had left her hair untied to give it as much cover as she could, but she dared not reach round to help it nor give any other indication of its presence to the placktoids awaiting her. Would the squashpump make it out in time? She couldn't feel it anymore. It must have been glided down the outside of her wetsuit. Behind her, the doors slid closed. Her heart thumping, she prayed the slug-like alien hadn't been caught between them.

"Stay where you are," said a large placktoid that resembled a staple remover. She had always hated their metal teeth. "Open your facial orifice."

Carrie assumed it meant her mouth. She opened wide. A light beamed into her mouth from a biro-like placktoid that rested on its nib nearby.

"DNA match confirmed. This is the human named Carrie Hatchett," said the biro.

DNA? How did the placktoids know her DNA? She had spent some time aboard their ship, imprisoned in a cell with Dave, but the ship had crashed into the oootoon ocean. Unless the placktoids who escaped had taken a sample of her genetic code with them? They were even more vengeful and devious than she'd thought. But on the other hand it was a good sign. If they were checking her DNA to identify her, perhaps they weren't relying on identifying her through

appearance, which was vastly different from normal.

Glancing down at her respirator indicator, her chest tightened. The needle had left the centre and was working its way to the right. Had the squasHPump made it outside? Was it on its way to complete its task? Would it manage to do it in time before her oxygen ran out?

“Locomote through here,” said the staple remover. It moved to a metallic archway.

“You mean swim?” asked Carrie. She moved towards the arch.

“What is this thing?”

“Do as directed.”

“It’s a weapon scanner, right?”

“Do as directed or you will be immediately destroyed.”

“I’m moving, I’m moving,” said Carrie, increasing her speed, wobbling as she went. She certainly had no reason to delay. She had no time to lose. But if this was a weapon scanner, and she had every reason to believe it was, now was the crunch time.

She closed her eyes and passed beneath the arch, her heartbeat resounding in her ears. When she came out the other side she stopped, hardly daring to breathe. Opening her eyes, she saw the placktoids hadn’t moved. No alarm seemed to have gone off. The plan had worked, so far.

## Chapter Twenty-Four – Crunch Time

THE COMMANDER AT THE placktoid base was every bit as terrifying as the one Carrie had helped send to indefinite confinement on Ootoon. Its steel maw faced her, a bank of knife-like teeth. Behind the maw lay the long, rectangular box section of the ‘shredder’, though she doubted it held the remains of out-of-date or confidential office documents. Along the sides were the caterpillar treads she vividly remembered churning when she was chased aboard the placktoid ship. Particularly sharp in her mind was dreadful wrenching, grinding sound of the commander’s engine at full throttle.

It was the size of the thing that really made her heart quail. Had she underestimated the magnitude of the first one she had seen? She could hardly believe it. She’d heard the mind exaggerated when it came to objects of deepest fear, not underestimated them. If this new commander really was substantially larger, she might be in trouble. There might not be enough—

“Carrie Hatchett,” the commander’s deep bass voice boomed. “You have been tried by the Court of the New Social Order and found guilty of treason and false imprisonment. Your sentence is—”

“Wait, what? What’s the New Social Order? I’ve never heard of it. The Unity and Transgalactic Council don’t recognise this body.” Clearly, the placktoid commander wasn’t going to hang around before administering her punishment. What happened to the long speeches given by the baddies that allowed the hero time to escape? Hadn’t it watched Earth TV? She had to stall it, to delay the discharge of her sentence, for obvious reasons, but also to give the squashpump time to do its work.

“The New Social Order is the legitimate galactic government, soon to become historical fact. Your collusion with the ootoon has been thoroughly witnessed, recorded and documented. There is no doubt you are responsible for the illegal apprehension and confinement of placktoid commander 783. Your sentence is—”

“No, that’s wrong. There is no galactic government. The Unity and Council work in partnership to supervise and administrate galactic affairs. Anyway, what do you mean, *soon to become* historical fact? It’s either historical fact or it isn’t.” She was stalling, of course, but her curiosity was also piqued and the commander’s words pierced the numbing terror that threatened to overwhelm her. “Isn’t it?” Inside her helmet, sweat trickled down her face, not only due to the padding in her wetsuit. *Stay calm, Carrie. One step at a time.*

“The Unity and Transgalactic Council have also contravened the tenets of the New Social Order, and they shall be dealt with in due

course.”

“Ha, you plan to take on the Unity? You’ll never do it. They have the most advanced technology there is; the very best that every civilisation has to offer. You think the placktoids alone can beat the might of the entire galaxy?” Carrie wondered if she’d heard that line in a movie once. She shook her head. Her terror was making her mind wander. She needed to concentrate, now most of all. What was the squashpump up to? Why was it taking so long?

“Only the placktoids have the right and the might to lead the galaxy to its supreme manifestation and out into the universe. But that magnificent future is shortly to become no concern of yours, Carrie Hatchett. You are sentenced to...”

Carrie grimaced and took a step back. If she acted now, she might have a tiny chance at saving herself, but for the plan to work she had to wait. Glancing to right and left, she saw there were no other placktoids in the room. Presumably the commander was planning on carrying out her sentence itself. But why wasn’t it saying anything?

“No. That cannot be,” said the commander. “How? Recapture them at once.” Carrie’s heart leapt. The commander was clearly responding to an electronic communication from another placktoid, but in its confusion it was also speaking to her. Its words were all she needed. The squashpump had made it. It had climbed the placktoid base and reached the net holding the marsoliie. Applying a magnetic field neutraliser, it had opened the lock, releasing the net and setting the marsoliie free.

Finally, it was her turn to act. She ran toward the mechanical alien and tore down the zip on Audrey’s massive wetsuit. The ootoon confined within spilled out over the floor and beneath the commander’s steel teeth in a yellow tide. The placktoid commander took a second too long to recognise it and realise what was happening. Its caterpillar treads started up and it sped backwards, away from its nemesis. But it was too late. A tendril of ootoon had reached it, and the rest soon flowed in; into its treads, its engine and other inner workings, where it began to solidify. The commander started forward, apparently trying to attack Carrie with its last free movement. But the ootoon worked too fast. The placktoid jerked to a halt. It lurched back, and forward again before it froze, immobilised by the ootoon.

“Yay, we did it. We’ve got it now. Hold tight, hold tight, don’t let go. Don’t let go of what? Oh dear, someone isn’t paying attention. Just stay still, we’ll explain later. All right.”

Carrie hoped the ootoon could also prevent the commander from communicating with the rest of the placktoids, but she hoped in vain. Its mechanical subordinates poured into the room. Darting around the side of the immobile shredder for protection, Carrie pulled two of the

new weapons from her swimsuit. Thank goodness the placktoids' scanner had been unable to penetrate the ootoon and find them. She leaned out, a weapon in each hand, and concentrated with all her might to fire them. She scored two hits. There were so many placktoids it was difficult to miss. True to their promise the high-energy beams sliced through the mechanical aliens, searing their innards. As their comrades fell in pieces the remaining placktoids hesitated, seemingly surprised and dismayed by the carnage Carrie had caused.

Hope lifted her spirits. The placktoids were not firing at her. Presumably they didn't want to risk hurting their beloved commander. If she could just hold them off long enough. Now the marsoliie were free, the placktoids had no hostage protection. The Unity ship must be on its way. Sure enough, as the realisation formed in Carrie's mind, an explosion hit the base and rocked it. The Unity had arrived. Placktoids were sent toppling to the floor.

Taking advantage of their plight, Carrie leaned out and fired again, wielding yet more damage to the upended placktoids. But then their confused behaviour changed, and they rose as one. Carrie guessed that, unheard by her, the commander was communicating with his troops, rallying them to attack. They turned together and advanced towards her position.

Another explosion rocked the base, tumbling her through the water and knocking both weapons from her hands. Her ears rang with the boom that resounded. She scrambled for the weapons and managed to grab one as she sighted a placktoid zooming towards her. She cut it down with a burst of fire, but her hope plummeted. They were on both sides of the shredder now, surrounding her.

"Hurry, please hurry," she murmured. A placktoid appeared in front of her. She fired and whirled around just in time to destroy another that approached her from behind. Where were the Unity troops? Surely they must have got into the base by now? Unless they thought she would never make it. Unless they had given up on her and were just going to destroy the base.

Carrie swallowed her fear and dived for the second weapon. She glided through the water, grabbed it, turned onto her back and fired with both hands simultaneously, hitting two placktoids square in the middle. One fell apart and stopped moving, but the other continued to advance, even though its top half lay twitching on the floor behind it. Carrie fired again, searing a hole through it, but still the placktoid approached, her hit only slowing it down.

Sensing movement behind, she whirled round to mow down three mechanical aliens that were nearly upon her. A metal arm grabbed her. The wounded placktoid had reached her. She spun and kicked out

at it, propelling it against the commander's side. It rebounded and flew at her head. She ducked. The placktoid hit the wall behind her, denting the metal. A watery clunk echoed through Carrie's helmet. Still the placktoid moved. As it advanced again, Carrie leapt to meet it. She reached inside it as deep as her arm would go, grabbed a handful of wires, and yanked. As the wires came free, finally, the placktoid stopped.

But it wasn't enough. More of the mechanical aliens were coming up, and behind them, still more. It was no good. She would never get them all. She slumped against the wall, a weapon in either hand. Her vision was blurry, and she felt dizzy and faint.

Was this it, then? Was this how she was going to die? Ah well, at least the marsoliie were safe. It was a shame she didn't get to tell Gavin what the placktoid commander had said. But never mind, they would probably figure it out soon enough.

The placktoids were nearly upon her. Her eyes slowly closed. The last thing she saw was her respirator indicator needle. It was on the far right. She was out of air.

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Surprise Awakening

HEARING WAS THE FIRST of Carrie's senses to return. Her ears were ringing. She also heard bubbles and swishes. She was still underwater. She forced her eyes open. Above was a ceiling—the ceiling of the placktoid base. She hadn't moved from where she had fallen. Yet she was still alive. The placktoids she had last seen moving in hadn't killed her. She drew in a deep breath. Sweet air filled her lungs, sending energy coursing through her. Oxygen. Someone had replaced her respirator tablet. Probably the same someone whose arms she felt about her, supporting her shoulders and head.

Rapid communications sounded through her helmet radio. Orders and spurts of information. She was too dazed. She couldn't understand what they were talking about.

She blinked and squinted, forcing her eyes to focus. Who was holding her? The person was out of her immediate view. Was it Dave? Had he come to find her in the wreckage of the placktoid base? She twisted her head to see the person's face, but all she saw was the opaque visor of a Unity soldier. Her heart sank. She was relieved to be alive, but she felt a burning need for a familiar face.

"Hatchett's coming round," called a voice.

It was a woman's voice. It seemed to come from the soldier holding her. Carrie recognised the voice. After a few moments, she made the connection. "B—Belinda?"

The helmeted figure nodded.

"You..." Carrie struggled out of the half-dandrobian's grasp, and in her weakened state began to float away. She steadied herself against the wall. "You saved me?"

Belinda shrugged. "I suppose you could say that. We were all searching the base for you, trying to locate you before the decision was made to blow the place sky high. We only had a couple of minutes left before we had to give up the search because we knew your respirator tablet would be exhausted. I saw the placktoid wreckage spilling from the door and figured only you could have created it. As soon as I saw the commander I knew I had the right place. Called in my buddies and saw you here behind him. We put an end to the placktoids you hadn't managed to polish off. Just in time, it seems."

Carrie surveyed the wreckage that lay before her, the remains of the placktoid commander. The Unity soldiers had taken no chances in destroying the mechanical alien. It was unrecognisable. If she hadn't seen it before the soldiers started work, she wouldn't have been able to guess what it used to be. The Unity did not mess around. Floating



through the door on their way out were long ribbon strands of ootoon. She would speak to it later to thank it for doing a brilliant job.

She tried to stand, but dizziness overcame her.

“Rest a while, Hatchett,” said Belinda. “You were out cold when I found you. I don’t know how long you went without oxygen. Your tablet was nothing but powder when I replaced it.”

A chill settled on Carrie. She had come so close to death. If Belinda hadn’t found her... “But, what are you doing here? How come you aren’t back on the Council ship? Have you rejoined the Unity?”

Belinda shook her helmeted head. “I asked to take part in the attack and they let me, for old times’ sake.”

“The attack.” Carrie recalled the explosions she’d felt inside the base. “What happened?”

“The second the marsolii were out of danger, the gunship started firing. The return fire was potent, and the ship sustained significant damage. If it weren’t for the fact that we fired first, we might not have beaten them, but we managed to take out their main defenses.

“Our fighter ships moved in, too, and got most of the placktoids that streamed out of the base. There weren’t many. Once they were down, us foot soldiers advanced into the base to find you, like I said. But apart from the commander and the other placktoids in here, the base was almost entirely deserted.”

“But I saw lots when I came in,” said Carrie. “Are you sure they checked the whole base?”

Belinda nodded. “It looks like most of them retreated through a gateway as soon as they knew the fight was lost and their commander was trapped by ootoon.”

“They left through a transgalactic gateway again.” Carrie frowned. The placktoids had returned to their hideout, wherever that was. Thinking back to her short conversation with the commander, she had a suspicion his odd comments might hold the clue as to where that hideout was. If she was right, she needed to speak to Gavin and the other Managers. “I’m feeling better, Belinda. I think I can swim back now. I’m getting pretty chilly, too.” Audrey’s deflated wetsuit sagged around her, its zip open where she had released the ootoon. She struggled out of it. Wearing only her swimsuit, she shivered in the cool water. “I need to get back to the Council ship.”

“Okay, I’ll come with you.” Carrie and the half-dandrobian set off through the placktoid base. As they approached the exit, Belinda said, “I heard you were terrible during target practice. No one held out much hope for you once the commander realised the game was up. But I saw you put paid to a fair few placktoids before your respirator tablet gave out. Well done.”

“Thanks,” said Carrie. She thought she could get used to this new, friendly Belinda. “You know, I found my aim improved considerably when I thought I was about to die.”

“Hmm...that’s often the case, or if it isn’t, you don’t get to hear about it.”

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OUTSIDE THE BASE, CARRIE saw with grim satisfaction, was the wreckage of the staple remover. The Unity attack had reduced it to scrap metal. Nearby were pieces of paperclip and other bits of placktoid she didn’t recognise.

“Good t’ see ye made it.”

Carrie spun round. It took her a moment to spot the squashpump halfway up the entrance wall. “I’m glad to see you made it, too.” Her fears had been greatest for this small officer trainee. At any moment it might have been spotted scaling the wall or searching for and releasing the mechansim that held the marsoliie captive. The placktoids would have picked it off easily. And once the attack started, it could have been hit at any time. She’d had the protection of the building at least. “You were so brave.”

“Och, there wasna much chance of yon placktoids seeing me. Us squashpumps often get overlooked because of our size, y’ know. I was glad o’ the chance t’ help out.”

“We couldn’t have done it without you.” The slug-like aliens were tough little fellows.

Carrie shivered. She was seriously cold now. “See you back at the ship.” The Council starship had drawn near, and she could see the Unity ship too. The placktoid weapons had destroyed its camouflage device and now it was easy to see. For a simple Unity gunship, it was impressive. Twice the size of the Council ship, it was sleek and glistening where it wasn’t blackened by placktoid fire. The sight of it gave her heart for the galactic war that threatened. The placktoids may have gateway technology, but the Unity forces would still take some beating.

With the Council ship much nearer, Carrie didn’t face the long swim she had made in getting to the placktoid base, and she was no longer hampered by Audrey’s wetsuit filled with ootoon. But despite these facts, she found herself swimming slowly. Belinda kept pace beside her, not speaking, probably thinking she was exhausted from the trials of the day. The truth was, as she swam, she was taking another long look at the ocean surrounding her.

She would no doubt be sent home soon along with the other

trainees. Her outlook had changed considerably in the last few hours. Now she knew it might not be the last time she would get to see the underwater world of the marsoliie and other sentient creatures of Gaginon. No Groups or Singles remained, but in the distance she saw an edge of the massive floating mat and other sea creatures she hadn't seen before. She took in the underwater view, fixing it in her memory until perhaps, one day, when they had defeated the placktoids, she could return.

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## Chapter Twenty-Six - Reconciliation

WHEN CARRIE GOT BACK to the Council ship, the first person she looked for as she stepped out of the airlock was Dave, but he was nowhere to be seen. Audrey was there, and she enveloped Carrie in a large, blobby hug. The ootoon had also made its way back after draining out of the placktoid commander and had returned to its box, where it appeared to be none the worse for wear. The other trainees formed a welcoming party, and as Carrie was hugged, slapped, jiggled, bumped and subjected to the various species' other forms of congratulations, she felt both undeserving in comparison with the bravery of the ootoon and the squashpump, and slightly hurt. Where was Dave? Why hadn't her best friend appeared? She'd thought they had reconciled, but maybe he was still angry with her.

As soon as she could be extracted from the trainees, Carrie was whisked away to a debriefing session with Gavin, Errruorerrrrrhch and the other managers. She was still in her swimsuit, but Errruorerrrrrhch gave her a blanket to wrap herself in. The managers wanted to know what had happened, detail by detail, what she had seen inside the placktoid base, and exactly what the placktoids had said to her. Knowing that any clue as to where the placktoids were hiding out was vital, Carrie concentrated hard to remember and tell them everything she could, no matter how small or insignificant it might have seemed at the time. But she thought she already knew the placktoids' whereabouts, and after hearing what the commander had said to her, the managers were inclined to agree with her conclusion. They made her promise to keep the news confidential, however, at least for the time being, until the Transgalactic Council received the information from Carrie's debriefing and decided on their next move.

Exhaustion overwhelmed her as she left the Central Office. The corridors of the starship were silent. It seemed the trainees were at a meal or other activity. After all the hubbub at her return and the long questioning by the Council Managers, Carrie was grateful for the peace and quiet. In all the excitement she had lost track of time, and the view from the portholes gave little indication as to whether it was lunchtime or late evening. She yawned and rubbed her eyes and decided to go back to her room. Maybe Dave would be there. If he wasn't she could get a little sleep at least.

Her cabin was exactly as she had left it that morning. She picked up her pyjamas from off the floor and changed out of her swimsuit. She took a quick shower, returning the wet towel to the shower room before getting into bed and falling quickly into a deep sleep.

The next thing she knew someone was waking her. Opening her

eyes a slit, she saw Dave's face peering at her. Turning away from him, she murmured, "I'll get up in a minute. You go to breakfast without me."

"Carrie, it's evening."

"What?" She forced her eyes open. Remembering the day's events, she turned back to her friend. "What are you doing here?" She sat up. "And where have you been? I thought you'd be here when I got back. Where did you go?"

He grinned. "Sorry, I meant to be back in time to see you, but I had other things to do. Get up and I'll show you what I mean."

"All right. Give me a minute." Carrie gave a stretch, easing her tired muscles from her long swim. She pushed back her blankets, swung her legs over the edge of the bunk and jumped down. She looked curiously at her friend's secret, triumphant expression. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me what this is about."

"Just get dressed. I'll wait for you outside."

As soon as she was ready, Dave took her hand and led her through the ship.

"Hey," Carrie said, "did you know Belinda saved my life?"

"Yeah, I heard. She's pretty cool when you get to know her."

They entered an area unfamiliar to Carrie. As they stepped through an open door she gasped. "I never knew this place existed. Why didn't they tell us about it?" The room was like a small lecture theatre, with seats and other furniture designed to accommodate a range of species, though it wasn't large enough to seat the whole ship's complement. Instead of facing a podium, the audience looked out through a rounded, cone-shaped window into the sea beyond. Carrie was mildly annoyed. All the time that she had spent aboard the ship peering through small portholes, when she could have come to this observation deck and seen the starscape or ocean in all its splendour.

Her irritation melted away, however, in the face of the sight outside. The trainees and Council staff who had gathered there parted so that she and Dave could go to the front for a good view. The marsoliie had returned. Massive Groups floated just beyond the ship, pulsating and trembling in the ocean currents.

"Why are they here?" Carrie asked.

"Just watch," replied Dave. They had arrived just in time. Immediately after he spoke, the Groups began to break apart. Individual by individual, Singles detached from the whole, floating apart, until the ocean heaved with lone marsoliie like scarlet snowflakes that danced but never fell.

"Wow," said Carrie. She itched to be out among the beautiful, fluttering creatures. She turned to her friend. "So the marsoliie all decided to be Singles?"

“Not quite. It isn’t over yet. Just wait a while. I think you’ll see something very special.”

Returning to the view, Carrie saw two Singles rejoin. A third came to join them and attached itself. Then a fourth and a fifth. The new Group began to lazily spin, and another Single approached to become one with the ball. Other Singles were joining ranks, forming larger and larger Groups. These swam among the crowd, as if inviting more Singles into their midst.

Carrie rested her elbows on the window, her eyes following the beautiful and mysterious movement. After some time, the , the ocean was filled with a mixture of Groups and Singles. Then the marsoliie began to disperse.

“Oh, I think I get it,” said Carrie.

“Do you?” asked Dave.

Carrie frowned. “Actually, I don’t get it at all. Why did the Groups split apart just to join up again? And how come they aren’t chasing the Singles any more?”

“Well done, Dave,” said Gavin as he approached. “It must feel gratifying to witness the results of your efforts.”

Carrie’s friend smiled broadly. “Yes, it is.”

“Dave would make an excellent Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer, Carrie,” said Gavin. “I am pleased that he accompanied you on previous assignments, even as an unauthorised companion. He clearly possesses an excellent range of skills. Thank you for introducing him to the Council. In the forthcoming fight with the placktoids, we will need all the expertise we can acquire.”

“Is one of you going to tell me what’s going on?” asked Carrie.

“Oh, are you unaware what your companion accomplished? When the marsoliie were released from the placktoids’ net, only Groups remained. It was apparent that during their time of imprisonment all of the Singles had been assimilated, undoubtedly against their will. Their confinement allowed them no opportunity to escape.

“Seeing this, Dave volunteered himself to approach and reason with these Groups before they dispersed into the ocean. As a result of his excellent efforts at intervention and negotiation, the Groups took it upon themselves to separate. Only those Singles who actively approached others would reform into a Group, while others who did not were free to resume their individual lifestyles.”

“That’s where you went,” exclaimed Carrie. Dave smiled.

“It is a rare officer who can, with such speed, facilitate a positive, mutually agreed outcome,” said Gavin. “Such self-originating agreements are the most stable and long-lasting, and they are the pinnacle of achievement in the business of mediating in intercultural

community crises.”

Carrie patted her friend on the back, swallowing a certain amount of jealousy. Gavin was right, it was a great achievement, and Dave would make a great officer. She just wished she was equally good at the job and didn't constantly blunder through her assignments, succeeding only through luck.

A knot formed in her stomach. The training course was over and they would soon hear who had passed and who had failed. Despite the positive outcome with the placktoids, Carrie still held grave doubts she would be returned to duty. From the deep brain scan results, through her various gaffes during training, to her confession to Gavin that she had stolen a weapon, she assumed she would be gently advised—or ordered—to resign, if she wasn't outright sacked.

She didn't want to become a Unity soldier as Belinda had. Though she loved travelling across the galaxy and meeting alien species, her experience with the placktoids had been terrifying. She sparred in Bagua Zhang for fun and exercise, not because she liked fighting. It looked like her career was over.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Placktoids’ Plan

THEIR BAGS WERE PACKED and Carrie and Dave were back in their ordinary, Earth clothes. They were waiting in their cabin for Errruorerrrrrhch to come and talk to them about the training week before they returned home. Farewells in the canteen after breakfast had been emotional. The trainees were unsure of when they might see each other again. Liaison Officers generally worked remotely and rarely went to the Transgalactic Council offices or met staff other than their direct managers. And Carrie was sure that this would be her last time aboard a starship; her last encounter with a Council Manager; her last venture into space. She had burst into tears as she had tried to get her arms around Audrey to give her a proper hug. The green blob had literally saved her life. She could never have come up with the plan to fool the placktoids on her own.

Now she was sniffing and wiping her eyes as she checked the cabin for anything she might have missed. As she was crouching to look under the bunk she gave a particularly loud sniff.

Dave sighed. “It’ll be good to see Toodles and Rogue again, won’t it?” he said. Carrie didn’t answer. After a pause he continued, “As soon as we get back, the first thing I’m going to do is brew a cuppa, then I’m going to eat something, anything, that tastes like normal food.” When Carrie still didn’t answer, he added, “You haven’t got any biscuits, have you?” and chuckled.

Carrie sat back on her heels. “Thanks, Dave. I know what you’re trying to do and I appreciate it, but it’s okay. I am looking forward to seeing Toodles and Rogue and I’ll be all right after a day or two. It was just that I really loved this job, and it’s going to be hard to return to an ordinary life when I’ve travelled across the galaxy and met aliens, you know?”

“Huh? What makes you think you won’t be working as a Liaison Officer?”

“I told you before, I’m going to fail the course. Gavin warned me.”

“You’re not still going on about that, are you? Are you mad? After what happened with the placktoids you think the Council’s going to fail you?”

“That was a group effort. It wasn’t just me. And it wasn’t even my idea. Audrey thought up most of the plan. The only reason I was there was because it was me the placktoids wanted. It’d be nice to be able to take credit for the success, but I honestly can’t, and even if I could it wasn’t Liaison Officer work. It wasn’t what we’ve been training in all week.” She stood and went to the cabin window for a final look into space. The starship had left Gaginion overnight, and now outside all



was black velvet dotted with brilliant, hard points of light. Off to starboard was a reddish-pink burst of gaseous nebula.

"Think about it, Dave. You can't blame them. I was terrible at nearly all the exercises. The only thing I could do well was swim. Swim! Even *I* wouldn't hire myself. I should never have strong-armed Gavin into taking me on." Carrie swallowed. It was time Dave knew the truth, the information she'd been withholding from him all week.

He tutted. "Look, for a start, Audrey said you contributed a lot to the plan, and most importantly you listened and you thought everything through before you did anything. You're being ridiculous —"

"There's something I haven't told you, as well." She turned to face her friend, her cheeks turning rosy. "During our first night on board, they scanned our brains to assess our mental compatibility with the Liaison Officer role. I got a really low score. Only thirty-four per cent."

"They scanned our brains without telling us? That isn't right."

"They did tell us, but you'd left the canteen by then and you were asleep by the time I got back here. Anyway, it's pretty clear from what's happened this week that the assessment was correct."

"I still think you're...hang on, I didn't see my result. Did you see it?"

Carrie hung her head. "Yes, I did see it but I didn't tell you. I'm sorry. I was upset. You see, you scored ninety-seven."

"Ninety-seven." Dave's eyes widened and he smiled. "That's..." Seeing Carrie's expression he stumbled over his words. "I mean, that's..."

"It's okay. You did really well, and you'll make a great officer. Aren't you glad I made you come along?"

"Well, now that you mention—" The doorbell sounded. Errruorerrrrhch had arrived. But when Dave opened the door, Gavin was there.

"Hello, Carrie and Dave. My paternity leave has come to an end and I have resumed my duties. I am here to give you your feedback and send you home. I imagine you will both be looking forward to returning to Earth? Would you prefer me to speak to each of you in private?"

"Come in, Gavin," said Carrie, pleased to have this final encounter with her massive, bronze, insectoid Manager. "You can tell me the news in front of Dave, I don't mind."

"Good, good," replied Gavin as he eased himself into the room. "It would save time to speak to you together, providing Dave does not object?" Dave shook his head. "Very well. First of all, let me congratulate you on a successful training week. I hope you enjoyed the experience and derived benefit from it. Secondly—"

“You mean I passed?” exclaimed Carrie.

“But of course.”

Carrie let out a whoop and punched the air. She grabbed Dave and hugged him, then turned to Gavin and opened her arms to hug him too, but couldn't find a suitable place. She settled for kissing one of his antennae instead.

“It is most odd that you would imagine you had not passed the course.”

“That's what I kept telling her,” said Dave.

“But I only got thirty-four per cent on the brain scan.”

“Per cent? You are mistaken. I understand your confusion now. The result of the scan is not expressed as a percentage. Perfect compatibility—the highest possible result—is zero. That is never achieved. Thirty-four is a very high score. I am guessing that perhaps you did not read through the information provided?”

“Oh, I, err...” Carrie's elation turned to embarrassment. She really would need to pay more attention in the future.

Dave rolled his eyes. “Did you have something else to tell us, Gavin?”

“Yes, indeed. Carrie, the Council and Unity have discussed the report you provided on your encounter with the placktoid commander and have come to the same conclusion that you yourself derived. This information is to remain completely confidential, however, so I must warn you that what I am about to say must not be passed on nor even hinted at to another sentient entity until you receive explicit permission to do so. I am able to inform Dave because I have a proposal for you both to consider.

“But first, Dave, after your exemplary performance I am hoping you will accept the position of Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer?”

“Well, I...” He ran his hand through his hair. “It's a bit risky, but this week's been a lot more fun than I thought it would be, catering provision aside. I suppose...”

Carrie held her hands to her chest, her fists clenched.

“I suppose so. Okay.”

“Yes!” Carrie punched the air again, grabbed her friend's head, pulled it down and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“I am extremely pleased to hear that. You will be an invaluable member of the team, I am sure. Furthermore, due to the current crisis the Council is deploying its Officers in teams of two as an additional safety measure. You two would be expected to work as partners. Is that agreeable to you?”

“That would be brilliant,” exclaimed Carrie.

“Hmm.” Dave rubbed his chin. “Well, all right then.” Carrie

punched his arm and he chuckled.

“However,” said Gavin as he lowered his head in a serious manner, “I must warn you that I have not forgotten the incident of the stolen weapon. Any further transgressions of a similar nature will result in your instant dismissal. I hope you both fully comprehend me?”

Carrie and Dave nodded solemnly. “But, wait a minute,” said Carrie, “you told me someone was going to fail earlier. If it isn’t me, who is it?”

“It was Bbbbbb. You remember the light? It was very aloof. It refused to have anything to do with any of the other trainees, and such an attitude is detrimental to effective service in the Liaison Officer role.

“Now to the matter at hand. The intelligence gathered by Carrie has led us to believe we know where the placktoids are hiding. Indeed, it is the only reasonable explanation for their total disappearance, and, to be frank, there is some embarrassment regarding the fact that no one thought of the answer earlier.”

“It isn’t ‘where’, though, is it?” said Carrie.

“No indeed. Not where, but *when*. The reason we have not been able to locate the placktoids is because we have been looking for them in the present. In fact, they have gone back in time. Exactly what period of time has yet to be established. Their intention, according to the brief comment the placktoid commander made, seems to be to alter the events of history so that their species gains control of the galaxy from an earlier time period onward. Clearly they have not yet done so, or we would now be living under their dominion, if we were even to exist.”

“Woah,” said Dave. “I’m not sure I like the direction this is heading.”

“You surmise correctly. I would like to propose that you and Carrie form the Liaison Officer contingent of the team we send back to find the placktoids and prevent them from executing their plan.”

“We’d love to,” exclaimed Carrie.

At the same time time, Dave said, “We’ll think about it.”

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HER HANDS WRAPPED ROUND a warm mug of tea, sitting in her kitchen and watching Rogue wolf down his food, Carrie contemplated the events of the previous week and the task that lay ahead. Dave had gone home, keen to relax and recover before another day’s work at the call centre. She sipped her tea and wondered what they might find when they travelled back in time to the placktoids’ hideout.

Putting down her mug, she patted Rogue as he came over to her after finishing his food. She smiled. Whatever lay ahead, she would try to think before she acted, and with Dave by her side everything would be okay.

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